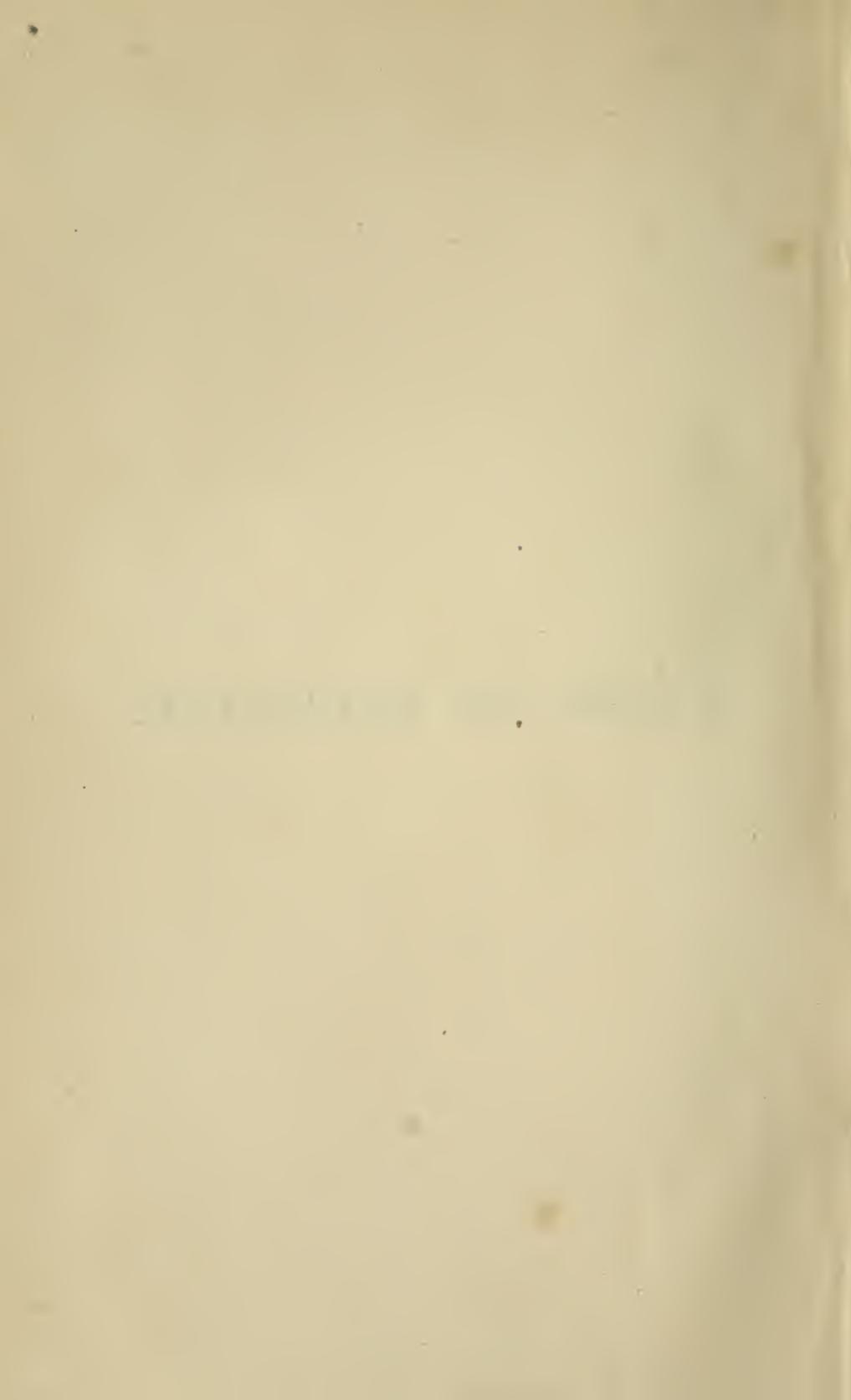


3 Vols
4/6

SARAH DE BERENGER.



SARAH DE BERENGER.

BY

JEAN INGELOW.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON, SEARLE & RIVINGTON,
CROWN BUILDINGS, 188, FLEET STREET.

1880.

(All rights reserved.)

LONDON:
PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

823

In 4s

1880

v. 1

Telfair-Johnson, 29 Nov. 1951.

January 29, 1880

SARAH DE BERENGER.

CHAPTER I.

“ THEN where is that woman now, Mrs. Snep ? ” asked the curate.

“ Well, sir, half-way to the town by this time, I should judge.”

Mrs. Snep had a very large wash-tub before her, and was using it with energy in the very small kitchen of a white-washed cottage. Such a pretty little one-storied abode, so rural, so smothered in greenery.

Too much so, indeed, for it stood with its back to a great hop-garden, and the long lines of hop-poles terminating against its

wall rose as high as the thatch of the roof, so that all the view obtained out of the kitchen casement was down one long over-arched lane of hop-bines, under which the softened light appeared to be endowed with both colour and quietness, it was so strangely green and still.

The curate glanced rather helplessly into that shadowy lane. He wished he was a good way down it.

There was something trenchant, capable, and rather defiant about the words and fashions of the cottager's wife. The curate was afraid of her.

Young curates often are afraid, and blush under the eyes of such women. We do not half enough consider their difficulties and their fears, especially that fear of making themselves ridiculous, which, perhaps, under the circumstances, this particular young curate felt just then with all the reason in the world.

However, he made up his mind to do his duty. To that end he said, “Considering how weak she was when I saw her yesterday, poor thing, and how very young her infant is” (“Eleven days old come nine o’clock this evening,” Mrs. Snep put in as a parenthesis), “I think her getting as far as the town to-day,” he went on, “must be quite impossible.”

Mrs. Snep, as he spoke, moved towards the fire. “You’ll excuse me, sir”—meaning, “You’ll please to get up.”

“Oh, certainly,” he exclaimed, rising, for the place was so small that unless he made way she could not pass; and she took a large iron pot of boiling water from the fire and emptied it over her cooling suds, before she addressed herself to the task of making him any direct answer.

Then, having set the iron pot on her stone threshold, as if on purpose that in his exit he might knock it over, she en-

sconced herself behind the mounting clouds of steam, and while energetically rubbing and wringing, said with an air of calm superiority—

“ It ain’t to be expected, sir, as you should know much about these here things. Not at present. But if you was to ask your ma, she would tell you that poor folks can noways afford to cocker themselves up as lying-in ladies do. When my oldest was eleven days old I took him on one arm and his father’s basket of dinner on t’other, and off to the field with ’em, thinking it no hardship neither. But your knowing the ways of poor folk, let alone the ways of tramps such as she, is not, as I said, at all to be expected.”

The curate felt annihilated. She had got the better of him not so much by pointing out his inexperience, as by the use of those words “ your ma.”

He was young enough to feel keenly

ashamed of his youth. She made him feel ignominiously young just then. He actually envied her superior age ; and the fulness of her knowledge raised in his mind something like a wholesome fear.

She had, however, intended to express civility. That a man so young should have been placed over her head as a spiritual guide, when he knew no more about sickness than he did about washing, or, indeed, about many of the other most important and familiar experiences of her life, was a thing at once ridiculous and aggravating ; but not the less would she acknowledge that he was a gentleman. Common men had mothers, and were thankful for them, but the delicate-handed woman who had brought him up was worthy of a finer name, so she gave it (as she thought), and politely called her “ your ma.”

“ She’s a tramp, sir,” proceeded Mrs. Snep ; “ and in my opinion no better than

she should be, though some folks (kind-hearted, if I say it) took pity on her in her trouble, and brought her in."

"And were paid for it, I suppose," observed the curate; for the trodden worm will turn; and she had made him smart, and knew it.

"Yes, sir," she answered, with a solemnity most impressive. "I should hope I know better than to throw money into the dirt, away from my own poor husband and children. She paid me, but little enough it were; and glad I were to see the back of her when she went away of her own free will—of her own free will—at ten o'clock this blessed morning."

"Did you show her the path to the road, the road to G——?" inquired the young man.

Mrs. Snep gave an energetic wrench to a much-twisted swathe of linen, then shook a snowy drift of foam from her hand with a

contemptuous action, as if she was thinking of her late lodger, and made answer—

“ No, we’d had words, and I took not to say any particular notice on her when she walked herself off. But she did say, ‘ Mrs. Snep, you’ve been a good friend to me, and I ask your pardon if I’ve offended you, for,’ she says, ‘ I didn’t ought to have said it. I’ve counted over my things now, and I’ll allow you’re as honest as the day.’ ”

“ As honest as the day,” she presently repeated, for she saw that this speech, which was entirely of her own invention, had impressed the curate very much.

But not as she had intended. “ I always thought you were robbing that poor thing,” was his mental comment on it, “ and now I am sure.”

“ Well, good morning, Mrs. Snep,” he exclaimed, forming a sudden resolution. Between his zeal and his discomfiture, he failed to notice the iron pot, which,

dashing through the door, he overturned upon a fresh clump of white pinks, blacking them and his own legs, and being obliged to submit to the loan of a duster to wipe them. “I always have to leave that woman with an apology,” he exclaimed, as he began to stride along the path towards the town.

He did not find the woman—naturally he did not—though he walked all the way to the town, for he had been right in his belief, and Mrs. Snep wilfully wrong. The woman could only walk a very little way. It was a sultry morning. She was very weak; a little child not two years old dragged upon her gown; she had her infant on her arm, and from it depended a bundle. She had been excited and angry, so that she trembled, and her little strength soon giving way, she turned off the dusty road to court the shade of the hop-garden, skirting it till she reached the end, and intending to enter the road again.

And so it came about that when the curate passed, this woman was still in the hop-garden, within fifty yards of him. Instead of turning to the left and regaining the road, she had taken the path to the right, and after wistfully gazing up some of the narrow bowers of fragrant bines, had crept into the shelter of one of them, all cool and shaded and still; there, propped up by the hop-poles, she wept, at first with a sick heart, but presently she found admittance to the enchanted valley of slumber; and if, instead of that, it had been the lost Eden, secret since our first mother's fault, she could hardly have shown a face of more supreme content.

“Oh, how common, but oh, how sweet is sleep!”

She was tall, dark-haired, and thin. One hand, which was rather pale than white, touched with protective care the head of her little two-year's-old girl, who, curled up on the skirts of her gown, slept more

soundly than herself; the other was spread over her young infant, whose meaningless blue eyes stared up from its mother's lap into the space of sky overhead.

Her possessions were but the clothes she wore—a cotton gown, a flimsy shawl, her small bundle, a little paper parcel of bacon and bread, an almost empty purse, these two infants over whom her heart yearned with unutterable love and despair, and nothing else at all except the wedding-ring—that was conspicuous enough on her honest, labour-hardened hand, and was the symbol of as bad a bargain as ever was made.

She had not lost a good husband by death, but had to mourn a bad one yet in life—a mean and cruel fellow, who from the moment she married him had let her see his contempt for the foolish passion that, spite of warnings, had dared to waste itself on him. She was free of him now for awhile, free from this object of her once

impassioned love, and now of her fear and shame. He had been arrested for a robbery with violence, convicted, and sentenced to penal servitude for fourteen years. She had been very foolish, but to know that was no element of consolation.

Her story in brief was this. She had in her early days been employed by a young invalid lady as reader, and when old enough had entered her service. The lady had taken some pains to improve her; the books, also, that she read had enriched her mind; insensibly she had become different, softened. She had a natural love of beauty and harmony; her light tasks and delicate surroundings fostered it.

The rough children she had played with, and her vulgar relatives, became daily more unlike her; their ways, not themselves, became distasteful to her. She envied not so much the rich as the refined.

Oh, to be a lady !

Her old mother in the tripe shop was still dear to her, though she shrank from her petty dishonesties and sordid aims—still more from the boast she made of these things in the bosom of her family. She hated the meanness, the meagreness, the smallness of life in the lanes, and the “smoots” and the “wynds.” She had an ardent, yearning nature, always looking out for something more, something higher; she wanted expansion—bright, soft air, decent living, truth and honesty, and also clean and becoming clothes.

She did not care for the footman’s jokes, or even for the butler’s gracious smile; courtship from those of her own class did not move her; she had left her world behind, and cared for nothing in it—with one sad, one fatal exception.

Among her better surroundings this one exception had fast hold of her still: a lad with a beautiful face, very pathetic

and fair. He was extremely lame of one foot, but contrived to do more mischief than most can though they be swift runners. He could sing, oh, so sweetly; and sometimes when he would pass, while in the dark, with blinds drawn up and the street lamps shining in, she sat watching her sick lady, she could hear him—two or three wild soft notes as he went by—and hear the tap of his weighted shoe, and her whole heart would cry after him. She longed to be walking beside him, in the soft night air, on that wet pavement, walking by him and weeping, asking—could he care for her if she gave him herself and all she had? praying him to be a better lad for her sake.

But it was only her heart that went out to him; she never spoke. He did not love her, nor know how she loved him.

She saw his possibilities, but of course he was not on the way to attain, he never

would attain, them; they had being only in her thought. For this woman was a poet in her degree, which means that she was a partaker of nature's boundless hope. She was made welcome to a hint of nature's wishes.

She was not one of those poets who write verses—very few are; none but such as are poets through and through should ever do that. Verse is only words, the garment that makes the spirit of poetry visible to others; and poets who have but little of the spirit often fritter that little away in the effort to have it seen. But she was a poet in this, that the elemental passions of our nature were strong in her, and she bowed to them with childlike singleness of soul.

Her love was so fresh, it might no more be withstood than the moss can withstand the dew that drenches it, and makes it sparkle in the morning. Her wonder

was more unsated for ever, her hope was more nearly possession than ours. If sorrow came up, it was a dark amazement. Would it not soon be over? There are many days of sunshine for one thunder-storm.

The youth, by name Uzziah Dill, was a journeyman shoemaker; might have done well enough but for his love of drink and bad companions, and for occasional fits of idleness, during which he would sit and brood. Sometimes she would pass him then, and wonder at him—was he in pain? was he wishing to do better? Once, as he sat under a little bridge, hidden to the waist in tall rushes, she went by, and their eyes met; for she had not been able to forbear stopping to say a few civil words to him. His beautiful face was clouded and dissatisfied, but a gleam of surprise lighted it up when he looked at hers. Her fate was sealed. She passed on, her cheek hot

with blushes ; but he came to see her. She had saved forty pounds, and was then three and twenty. She was easily persuaded that he meant to be a different man. She married him, and in spite of his evil ways, her love died hard, and almost broke her heart. It was not till he had spent all her money, and brought her and their little child into the deepest poverty, that he cured her of it. He had always neglected her,—he now went off with another woman ; and jealousy did in one day what coldness and evil living of all other sorts could not have worn out in years.

It was almost noon. The curate had not found her ; none had come to help. She slept on, and the least little movement in the air lifted a corner of the old newspaper in which was wrapped her food. It was shaken loose and rustled, showing its name —*The Suffolk Chronicle*, a provincial newspaper. What was it doing there ? The

woman, sitting on the slope of a long hill, had her back toward the Worcestershire beacon, and was looking to the south, over a lovely expanse of country. A small red-roofed city, with its cathedral peaks, folded into the hollow of a hill; a shining reach of river, with a bridge over it; walnut woods, hop-gardens, and remote points of rocky blue cliffs; and then another town, with spires piercing through the haze-like smoke in which it slept, and to which the sun had given a golden show of glory, that made it seem to hang low, roofing the place like yellow thatch, or a suspended crown.

The *Suffolk Chronicle* had come a long way—had been sent, in fact, to the vicar's wife, who was a Suffolk woman; from her the curate had begged some tea and sugar for his poor *protégée*, and she had given them wrapped in it. It was now doing duty again as a wrapper, but though the air had in part loosened it, there were creases

and folds so that the news (if any had been awake to read it) was only visible here and there. A certain fishmonger, whose name was hidden, advertised his ware. The parishioners of St. Matthew's had presented their vicar with—what did not appear.

After that came a notice—

“ If this should meet the eye of Hannah Dill—— ”

As these words were set free, a little portion of the bread became visible also, and a robin, emboldened by long silence, sprang upon the paper and weighed it down. He only stole one crumb and flew off, when up floated the paper again. “ If this should meet the eye ”—then a fuller waft of air shook the crumpled lines, and if any one had looked, it would have been at this—“ If this should meet the eye of Hannah Dill . . . hear of something to her advantage. This is the fourth time of advertising.”

It did not meet the eye of any one. But just then, with a sudden start and tremor, the baby turned and cried, and the exhausted mother woke, ravenous with hunger and cramped with the long restraint of her attitude.

It was high noon, and very hot. While she suckled her infant, she began with hollow eyes to open her parcel, and divide its contents with her elder child, who, rosy and smiling, now sat up, and held out dimpled hands, expectant of a share.

The child had never felt the gnawings of hunger; the mother had been familiar with them of late. She took as much for herself as she dared, then folded up the small remainder, and thrust it under some dock-leaves out of sight, lest she should be tempted to eat more, and leave nothing for the supper that she knew not where to procure.

She did not feel rested; a sense of her

position seemed to fall upon her like a blow. Where should she go? what should she do? She had been on her way down to Plymouth when her trouble had come upon her. There had been some wild fancy in her mind that she and the other poor mothers and wives of convicts would stand on the shore as they embarked, and take leave of them and see them sail.

She was not so free, in truth, of this wretched husband as she seemed; she had indulged strange notions as to her duty towards him. He would think it hard if she did not come, and bring him such comforts as she could beg or buy for him. Some despairing questions asked of such women as knew of these matters had let her know that the police would not suffer this, that the Government would not hear of that. Yet what he might be thinking of her was frequently in her thoughts. He had deserted her and not let her know of

his whereabouts for some time, but no sooner had he got himself into serious trouble, than he had contrived to have her informed of it. It must have hurt him, surely, never to have seen her anxious face in the court during his trial. Did he think she would not appear because she was ashamed of him?

A step coming on, and presently the curate standing before her.

She had her baby at her breast, and as she gently drew the flimsy shawl over its little head, he lifted his hat and made her a bow. It was not the sort of greeting a very poor mother, a probable tramp, might have expected, but she understood it; she knew it as the instinctive reverence of his young manhood for her occupation. There was something in the gentlemanhood and sympathy of this curate that was inexpressively comforting to her, but now the contrast between him and her wretched

husband forced itself on her with miserable force, and the tears fell fast over her thin hands.

She could not speak or at first think, but shortly she recovered herself and dried her eyes, and saw the curate seated on the grass before the opening of the tent-like bower. He was perfectly silent, not looking towards her, and he showed no wish to speak.

Oh, what a sigh! She herself could not have sighed more deeply. Then, but not without hesitation, he began to talk—to tell her, with all gentleness, that since she had so little in this world, he was the more fain to see her endowed with a sacred hope; and shortly, to her great surprise, though he spoke with such consideration—it might almost be said with such respect—she perceived that he took for granted she was not a married woman.

She lifted up her head, startled. “Yes, sir, I know we’re all sinners,” she ex-

claimed a little proudly; “we none of us have anything to boast of.”

“No.”

“And as you said, sir, ‘our sins do find us out.’ But, sir——”

“Yes, my poor friend.”

“I do thank my God for His Divine gift of a Saviour (you put it beautiful). I’ve often thought of it, since I sank so low. But, sir”—spreading forth her left hand to his view—“a true church parson like you put on that ring. I have a husband, and if I didn’t fear God I should say, worse luck.”

“My poor friend, I earnestly beg your pardon.”

“For I can never get free. I was warned—oh, I was warned. It’s not a sin, sir, that weighs me down; it’s a mistake I made—my great mistake.”

“Indeed,” he answered, in a tone of the deepest sympathy.

“Oh, my poor husband! My mistake! I must bear it; there’s nothing can rid me of it—nothing.”

“No,” answered the curate; and he sighed again. “Divine Love came down to take on itself our sins, but there is no Saviour to do the like for our mistakes.”

She looked up. It must have been a sharp pang of pity that could have imparted such a tone to his voice. It could not be all pity, she thought. No, he too must have made a mistake.

So seldom is true fellow-feeling found, that when it is really present, it almost always deceives. It had done so then. Her first thought was never forgotten, and it influenced her so long as that conversation remained engraven in her mind.

Perhaps in her fine, though homely face, he saw the sudden change of expression which answered to this thought; he may have even perceived what it meant. But

what need to explain himself to this stranger, this almost beggar! He turned away his face instead, and she noticed again what she had seen before, that, young as he was, he had one lock of perfectly white hair among the brown.

He stood a moment silent, then he took occasion to bring the conversation round to a point from whence he could draw his moral. Experts in teaching easily do this sort of thing, and the poor commonly expect it of them.

“If our sins were forgiven, our mistakes need not break our hearts. Nature was hard upon us, for their sake. She did not forgive them, and she could not forget. God did not interfere with her. But to us He would give a heart that should be the better for her discipline; even they should be among the ‘all things’ that shall work together for our good.”

CHAPTER II.

“IF this should meet the eye of Hannah Dill, whose maiden name was Goodrich, and who was born in the parish of St. Peter, Ipswich, she is desired to apply (by letter only) to H. G., Blank Court, High Holborn (she knows the number), and she will hear of something to her advantage. This advertisement appears to-day for the fourth time.”

The curate gone; the woman silent in her bower, with wide-open eyes full of amazement and fear.

The *Suffolk Chronicle* had done its work at last.

She had sunk very low; that, alas! is

common enough. The uncommon thing is the rising again.

“I fare to feel as if I must eat another piece,” the poor nursing mother had said, for she was hungry again; and she looked wistfully at her parcel under the roofing dock-leaves.

The curate had left her with the gift of a shilling; moreover, he had promised to arrange with a carrier, who was to pass by the hop-garden about three o’clock, to take her and her babes as far as the town, in his cart. For in that scattered hamlet, as he explained, he knew of no one who could lodge her.

What a slender hold she had on the care and thought of the world! None at all on its heart. She heard what little kindness it held for her only from the mouth of this one man. The pledge of it with which his hand had met hers was that one bit of silver, and the sigh with which he had murmured that he wished it was more.

She could not thank him, for little as he was to her, he was all ; and he was sending her away.

She meant to go : what else could she do ? She could not walk far ; she could not stay all night in the hop-garden. She possessed little more than the cost of two nights' lodging. When should she be strong enough to earn a maintenance for herself and her infants ?

“ I fare so hungry,” she repeated. She drew her parcel from under the leaves, and there was her own name, staring her in the face : “ *If this should meet the eye of Hannah Dill——* ”

She had been so long unused to good fortune, that at first she could see no promise in this. Suspicions had been cast upon her. The magistrates had said her husband must have had accomplices. Could this be a trap ? But why, if so, should they advertise for her in Ipswich ?

No, this advertisement was put in by her uncle the pawnbroker, the great man of the family, known to be “well to do,” said to be rich. He had long cast off her mother, and all his relations, because they plagued him so for money. He had been fond of her in her childhood, but when she married had gone out of his way to let her know that he meant to have no more to do with her. It was only when she heard this that she supposed he might have hitherto intended some kindness to her.

She had not been to Ipswich for several years. Her uncle did not know it; and the date of the newspaper was earlier than that of her husband’s trial.

This was no trap, this was real. She read again and again—took courage; but still wary, still unused to joy, weighed it and weighed it, between hope and fear, till hope suddenly got the upper hand, and she acted upon it at once. She opened wide her parcel,

and with a little help from her baby-girl, ate up all that remained in it, then and there.

A daring venture ! but when she began to waver again and doubt, the sight of that empty paper was an evidence to her of how sure she had felt when she made it.

It helped the joy of certainty to recur, and she felt so much the better for this and for the good meal, that when the carrier saw her seated on the step of the stile, and her little one playing by her with some flowers, he could hardly believe she was the poor creature whom he had been told to look out for.

Oh ! the bliss of lying in a golden shade, under the tawny tilt of that waggon, as it slowly moved along ; of hearing the carrier's whistle while he trudged beside it ; of conning the leaf of the newspaper, with oft-repeated scrutiny ; then looking out over the long blue hills, while they melted softly into air, and feeling as if all the world,

with herself, was conscious of some great reprieve.

Soon they halted at a little wayside inn, half smothered in walnut trees, and while the carrier's horse leaned over a long water-trough, she bought some milk, and the hostess came out to look at her baby, and compare its age and weight with her own. "It thrives," she observed.

"Yes, thank God," answered the Ipswich mother, "that do."

"And so you're going on to the town?"

"And further! I am going to a relation that have written for me from London."

"My way lies toward London," observed the old carrier, when they had started again.

Hannah Dill found that she should be twelve miles nearer to London if she went with the carrier to his destination, than if she stopped at the town. She agreed to pay the small sum he asked, in addition to what her kind friend the curate had already given

him, and, after stopping at a little hostelry outside the town to have her tea, set off again in the cool of the evening, and went on with the old man and a market woman.

Up and down the long hills they moved till the crescent moon rose, and then till it grew dark and the great horn-lantern was lighted, and the old man carried it, sometimes flashing its light on his horse, sometimes on the green hedges, and into fields, whose crops they could guess only by the smell of clover, or fresh-cut hay, or beans that loaded the warm night-air; anon, on whitewashed cottages, whose inhabitants had long been asleep, and again upon the faces of great cliff-like rocks, where cuttings had been made for the road into the steep hills, and where strange curly ammonites and peaked shells and ancient bones high up showed themselves for an instant in the moving disk of light that rose and sank as the lantern swayed in the carrier's hand.

Strange sights these ; and curious now and then to see it flash on the bronzed face of some wayfaring man, passing from the dark into the dark, with the customary “Good night.”

It was eleven o’clock when they reached the hostelry, and Mrs. Dill got down with her two sleeping infants. She felt that this had been a strangely long day, but that she was refreshed by food and hope and rest.

In the mean time the old man who had advertised for her had long given her up. He had soon taken to a sick bed, and for awhile had asked if Hannah had written—if Hannah was come. Then he ceased to ask, but sometimes bemoaned her absence ; and then he forgot her, and all the concerns of this life, and asked no more.

The morning after her arrival at the hostelry, Mrs. Dill wrote to her uncle, and as soon as possible afterwards received the money needful for her journey. The letter

was not in her uncle's handwriting, and said nothing about him. It was curt, and, without any kind words, desired her to be as quick as she could.

Between twenty and thirty years ago there were not so many railways in the west of England that one could count on getting to London in one day. Mrs. Dill was thirty miles from the nearest railway station. She reached it by the aid of another carrier's cart, and stood at her uncle's door about five o'clock the following afternoon.

She had never been in London before. The glaring white pavements and close heat oppressed her, while the swarms of people and of vehicles, the noise and hurry, made her tremble with a sense of danger for herself and her children. But she had not a shilling left, find her uncle she must ; and she still asked her way and pressed on, till at last she reached a shabby house in a dusky court, and, overcome with fatigue

and excitement, rang the bell. A woman, dressed in new mourning, presently came to the door, and seeing her shabby, woe-begone appearance, and her two children, took her for a beggar, and made this remarkable announcement, “No, we never give anything away in charity,” and was proceeding to shut the door in her face, when she exclaimed, “Wait a minute; I am come to see Mr. Goodrich. I’m his niece; you’ll show me in, if you please.”

“Bless my heart!” exclaimed the woman, with an irrepressible smile, “if here ain’t another on ‘em;” and then she became suddenly grave again, and answered coldly, “You’re too late, young woman. You may come in, if you choose, and see *all the others*, but you will not see Mr. Goodrich; he was buried yesterday.”

A sharp sense of misery and disaster, a sudden cry to the woman, “Oh, my babe! don’t let that fall,” then an eddy of black-

ness swirling over all things, and Hannah Dill fainted away.

After that, her first sensation was that her little girl was crying, and next that several other voices made a din about her—voices that long ago she seemed to have known, voices that made her think of Ipswich. In the midst of it all, and while still she could not move or open her eyes, a commanding voice quelled the others. “Either be silent and stand back, or at once leave the room.”

With a sharp sigh she presently got her eyes open, and saw dimly several people, but before them stood a gentleman, who spoke at once. “You are better. No need to raise your head. Your name?”

“Mrs. Dill.”

The assembly received this announcement with an audible groan.

“There was an advertisement,” she proceeded faintly, “in the *Suffolk Chronicle*,” and she tried to fumble for the paper.

“ Thank you. We know all about that. There are several copies of the *Suffolk Chronicle* here.”

Something scornful in the voice helped her to rouse herself; and at the same time a murmur of congratulation floated round the room. Somebody ventured to congratulate *Mr. Bartlett*. “ You’re not the gentleman, sir, to be so easy taken in. Hannah Dill, indeed! Is it likely ? ”

“ Not at all likely,” answered the commanding voice; “ but let her alone for the present.”

“ Where’s my babe? where’s my child ? ” she exclaimed, trying again to raise herself, and failing.

“ Close at hand,” answered the same voice, and a glass of wine was held to her lips; after drinking which she sat up, and observed that she was in a small wainscoted parlour, accommodated on a horsehair sofa. Several people were in the room;

for the moment they seemed to float before her ; but presently she gathered strength, and then, as they settled down into their places, her attention was attracted almost at once by a little stout old woman, with eyes like black beads, a long nose, and a curled "front" of brown hair. She was dressed in neat mourning, and no sooner met the full gaze of the tall, gaunt young woman, than she slipped into the background ; whereupon the gentleman whom they had called Mr. Bartlett looked surprised, and requested her to come forward, which she did, looking both irate and abashed.

Still Mrs. Dill looked at her. " You'll excuse me, ma'am. It's many years since I saw my aunt Maria—Mrs. Storer ; and folks alter strangely. I don't wonder, either, that any one should forget me, not expecting to see me dressed so as I am. You are the very moral of what my dear mother was

before she died. Why, dear me, ma'am, you *are* my aunt Maria ! I'm your sister Susan's daughter, aunt. I'm Hannah Goodrich."

"Tcha!" said the old lady, "it's no such thing; you're not a bit like her. What did you expect you were going to do here, deceiving of us?"

"It don't much signify what I expected," she answered, bursting into tears; but she had looked round the room first, and was quick to perceive at once how unwelcome she was there. "It don't much signify what I expected; I shall not have it now. He's gone that meant to be a good friend to me! You have no call to be so envious. He's past doing me any kindness; and I was more in need of it than you are."

Here followed a scene which the one silent spectator looked on at with equal surprise, interest, and attention; a scene of excitement, rage, and recrimination, during

which all the old heart-burnings and delinquencies of the Goodrich family were raked up, and argued over again. Two aunts and two uncles were challenged by Hannah Dill, in whose teeth it was forthwith flung that her husband was a convict, and that this was already known all over Ipswich, and that if the dear departed had only known it too, he never would have suffered her to enter his door; and who, in a passion of tears, replied by upbraiding of their unkindness in suffering their own sister, in spite of her humble entreaties for help, to die in receipt of parish pay, and be buried with a pauper's funeral; and then, after this short outbreak of indignation and outraged feeling, partly at their refusal to recognize her, and then, when they did, at their cruel mention of her wretched husband, being completely quelled by numbers, and cured of her faintness by passionate excitement, snatched up her baby in her

trembling arms, and seizing her other child by the hand, turned her back on them all, and, without any words of farewell, moved hastily towards the door.

But that gentleman, still looking on, was standing before it, leaning against the lintel. “Where are you going, Mrs. Dill?” he now asked, with slow composure.

“I don’t know,” she answered, with a choking sob. “I have nowhere to go to. I’ve come to-day and yesterday all the way from beyond Glastonbury, to see my poor uncle. But I’m not wanted; it’s no use my stopping now.”

“Oh! the person I wrote to, then? I think you are rather in a hurry,” he answered, with his calm, slow smile.

Here the two aunts said it was a shame, and they had never been used to convicts’ wives in the family. She quivered all over, and, with entreating eyes, appealed to him to let her be gone. But he, taking no notice, proceeded calmly.

“Your uncle, you know, might have left you something; you don’t seem to think of that, Mrs. Dill.”

To this speech, still trembling with excitement and passion, she made a remarkable answer.

“It’s no use at all what he might have said I was to have; they would divide it amongst themselves just the same—I know they would! They are that grasping and contemptuous, that they would never let me touch a thing!”

In the mean time, the aunts and uncles were all appealing to Mr. Bartlett, and saying it was a shame.

“So it may be,” he answered, coldly, “for anything I care. There is no doubt, then, that this is Hannah Dill. You had better sit down, Mrs. Dill.”

Mrs. Dill, having received this command, wept, but obeyed; and, observing the silence that had fallen on the company,

felt her excitement suddenly give way to shame at the passionate language into which she had been betrayed. Here she was obliged to face everybody, and all eyes were upon her.

“I’m sure I humbly beg your pardon, uncles and aunts,” she cried, drying her eyes with another sob.

“Mrs. Dill,” continued the lawyer, “have I your attention?”

“Sir?”

“I am the lawyer who made your uncle’s will. This being the day succeeding his funeral, I have just been reading it here, according to his directions.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“There it lies upon the table. You will please to make yourself at home here. Everything is yours.”

“Mine?” with a sharp cry of amazement.

“Yours.”

To say that on the instant Mrs. Dill was

pleased or proud, would be quite a mistake. Compunction and confusion strove in her mind, with doubt as to whether the family would let her take what had been given her, and utter abasement at her position as a convict's wife tied her tongue. She gazed helplessly at the lawyer, who, having taken a pair of new gloves from his pocket and deliberately put them on, was now buttoning them one after the other, as if they were of more consequence than her inheritance.

So they were to him.

It may have been, perhaps, that he saw her bewilderment as she gazed at them, that he put his hands behind him and said, with slow composure, "Mrs. Dill, I have some advice to give you, in the presence of these good people."

Having said this, he presently took up the will and put it in his pocket.

"Yes, sir," she answered, the sense of

his words reaching her at last ; and she gathered her first feelings of possession from the deep silence around her, and from his speaking to her only.

“ I advise you to make no promises whatever, and, in fact, utterly to decline any sort of discussion on business matters, till after you have seen me to-morrow morning.”

Hannah Dill gazed at him, and the room seemed to be full of sighs ; there was not a person present that had not heaved one.

When they reached the lawyer’s ears, he said, with rather more sharpness in his tone than he had used before, “ I may hope, I suppose, that I have your attention, Mrs. Dill ? ”

“ Yes, sir,” she replied.

“ And that you will attend to my advice, and make no promises till after you have seen me to-morrow morning ? ”

The room was full of sighs again.

“ You promise ? ”

“ Yes, sir,” she repeated, “ I do.”

Thereupon, having done his duty, he promptly retired, but, as if struck by an after-thought, had scarcely closed the door when he opened it again, and beckoned her out with his finger.

“ Have you any money ? ” he whispered kindly.

“ Only a few half-pence, sir.”

“ You would like to borrow this, then,” he said, and he put two sovereigns in her hand ; whereupon, feeling more relieved every instant, she returned, and, as is often the case on a great occasion, her first words were very simple and commonplace.

She looked round ; no eyes met hers. It was evident that she was mistress of the situation. “ Aunts and uncles,” she said, in a deprecating tone, and after an awkward pause, “ if you’re agreeable to it, let’s have our tea.”

By this time the aunt who had not

hitherto spoken had got the baby in her arms. The other, seeing that the matter was inevitable, constituted herself spokeswoman for the party, and said, in a way half grumbling, half ashamed—

“ Well, Hannah, I for one am willing to forgive and forget ; and there’s a gel down-stairs you might send out for anything you wanted—muffins, a relish, or what not.”

“ Or spirits,” put in one of the uncles ; “ or, in short, anything as you might think well tohev.”

Mrs. Dill sent out for new bread, fresh butter, plenty of muffins, green tea, loaf sugar, sausages, ham to fry, a bottle of gin, and a quart of milk.

When the meal was ready, the “ gel ” was trusted with the baby, and took it downstairs, while they all sat down and did it full justice ; but to nobody were the steaming sausages and delightful cups of hot strong tea so welcome as to Hannah

Dill herself, for she had eaten nothing that day but a dry crust of bread, which her little girl, after a sufficient meal, had daintily declined, so short had she been of money till those two sovereigns, the first pledges of prosperity, touched her honest hand.

She did not preside, would not have presumed to do so. One aunt served the ham and sausages, another poured out the tea, her uncles kept the bottle of gin under their special superintendence, and all was silent satisfaction, if not harmony, till the company could eat and drink no more.

CHAPTER III.

TIME, ten o'clock in the morning after this tea drinking.

Scene, the parlour before mentioned, and Mrs. Dill seated in it quite alone.

Her baby, once more in charge of the "gel," was down in the kitchen, staring just as contentedly at its dingy ceiling as she had done some days before at the celestial azure that showed between the leaves of the hop-bines. Her little girl, having found a dead black-beetle, was putting it to bed in a duster, with just as much pleasure as she had received before-time from the flowers.

Mrs. Dill had borrowed a black gown,

and a very large flat black brooch, from the taller of her two aunts, and was awaiting the lawyer's visit.

A lanky sunbeam, having got down between two opposite chimneys, seemed to be pointing out to her country eyes how dirty London was, what nests of dust there were in the corners of the window-panes, and how, wherever there was a crack in the plaster or the wainscot, blacks were attracted towards it, and marked its course by a winding line, that reminded her, as it has done so many other people, of a river traced upon a map. There was a garniture of pipes round the small looking-glass; ill-matched tumblers, standing on a card-table, flanked the now almost empty bottle of gin. But yet this was a parlour, and her sensations towards it, though made restless by suspense, were on the whole pleasure and pride.

And now Mr. Bartlett appeared, and took

the will from his pocket, which he read to her with all gravity, while she sat in state opposite.

It treated of certain shares in the Brighton Railway, of a particular messuage or tenement, of two fields bought of Richard Prosper, the butcher of Stoke, near Ipswich, and then, in the midst of a good deal of jargon concerning property real and personal, came the name of Hannah Dill, whose maiden name was Goodrich, and who was to have and to hold this same messuage or tenement, with other his said property real and personal, during the term of her natural life, for her sole and separate use, and if she survived her husband, to have power to will it away.

Here followed a codicil.

When Mr. Bartlett had read the will and the codicil from beginning to end, he got up and stood on the rug. She then rose also. How could she think of sitting unless he did ?

He perceived this, and also that she was very little the wiser for what she had heard.

“ The name of the executor, you perceive, is Gordon. He is a very respectable tradesman, but he is ill just now—not able to appear.”

Still silence.

“ I dare say the codicil puzzles you. Mr. Goodrich added that himself. His real property having proved troublesome and a losing concern to him, the executor is at liberty to sell it, provided it is forthwith reinvested, or laid out prudently. He also expressly permits that a portion be laid out in buying a business, or in stocking a shop.”

Then he sat down again, and so did she, and gathered courage to ask a question. “ Might she take the liberty to inquire how much a week the things he had been good enough to read about would bring in ? ”

“ How much a week—how much—a week ? ” he repeated slowly, as he took out

a pencil. “The income you should derive from this property,” he said, adding the various items together, “is as near as may be one hundred and eighty pounds a year; that is about three pounds a week, you know.”

Though she had been in such poverty, and this was riches to her, she betrayed no vulgar elation.

“Indeed, sir. Thank you. Is that money mine, to do as I like with?”

“Well, yes; for though you are a married woman, your husband cannot interfere with you at present.”

“No, sir,” she answered faintly. “He was sentenced, poor fellow, for fourteen years, and I know now that he is in the convict prison at Dartmoor. He is most likely not to leave the country, as I had thought; he is to work there at his trade.”

“You know, of course, that if he behaves well, he will be allowed to come out in

eleven or twelve years with a ticket of leave."

"Yes, sir; and that he will be allowed to write to me, and I to him, twice a year. I heard so from his brother, Jacob Dill, who felt sure that, in time, I should hear of that advertisement, and come. So he wrote here accordingly. They gave me the letter last night. I suppose, sir, that, when my poor husband comes out, he will have just as much right to the money, and to his children and to me, as if he had never got himself into trouble?"

"Certainly he will; nothing but a sentence for life can dissolve the marriage contract. You took him for worse as well as for better."

"I know, sir. Am I responsible to him then, do you think, for what I do with the money while he is under his sentence?"

"No, Mrs. Dill; it cannot be said that you are."

Here, being a restless man, Mr. Bartlett forgot himself, rose, and stood on the rug again. Mrs. Dill took occasion to rise also.

“About those relations of yours? I suppose you took my advice?”

“I did as well as I could,” she answered, with apologetic respect.

Here he gravely seated himself, and she followed suit.

“As well as you could?” he repeated.

“Sir, they made the remark so many times, that it seemed very hard and very unnatural—in short, they were that low about the will——”

“Well, Mrs. Dill?”

“That at last I said, if you were quite agreeable, I would endeavour to come to some sort of agreement with them. If you were quite agreeable, sir,” she repeated, seeing him knit his brow. “On consideration of which,” she went on, “they all promised faithfully that they would go

away. And they thought it would be as well that they should be out of the house till dinner-time, that I might be wholly free to talk it over with you."

"Your object in coming to an agreement, as you call it, would simply be in order to get rid of them."

"Well—yes, sir."

"Mrs. Dill, if once you begin to pay your relations to go, they will return and return, to be paid again. I should send them all to the rightabout, if I were you. They have enough. They all get a decent living."

"Oh, you simpleton!" was his thought; "you will be fleeced of every shilling before you are a year older."

"You must think of your young children," he remarked, "and their almost worse than fatherless state. They have no one but yourself to look to."

"Yes, I feel that, sir."

"And, then, something surely is due to

your uncle's wish, the old man's wish who earned this property, and has deliberately chosen to leave it to you."

"And I thought of that too. But it's mine now, and I fare to feel hurt by their reproaches. If it was only a trifle, my eldest uncle said; and so did his son, my cousin. I said perhaps Mr. Bartlett would not allow me to——"

"To give any of the income away?" he asked, when she hesitated. "I could not prevent it, nor Mr. Gordon either."

"So they said, sir," she replied, with an ingenuous sigh of regret. "They said, 'Hannah, if you chose to take and chuck it all in the Thames, they could not prevent it.'"

"Quite true."

Then she tried to explain to him her distress at having to do anything mean. She thought the old man had left his property to her more to spite his brothers

and sisters than out of any love to herself. She could not bear to hear those nearer to him speak so hardly of the dead ; she would buy his memory into better repute by making some sacrifice of his goods.

She had, as he observed, notions of honour and right not common in her class, but also she was simple in some other matters to a degree not common in any class. She had that temperament which, with one touch more of the divine in it than others, has also one touch more of the child. The child in her nature was destined never to grow up, as the yearning idea was too high ever to be satisfied.

“ You seem very much afraid of your aunts and uncles,” he said. “ But let me tell you one thing for your comfort : the law will not permit you to make away with any of the principal ; you can only deal with the income.”

“ That was what they made me promise

to ask ; they seemed to be afraid it was the case."

"As long as your husband is living you can only touch the income."

"Still, for the next ten or eleven years I could give them what I pleased out of the income."

"What *they* pleased, I think you mean ! You could. Did they name any particular sum that would satisfy them ? "

"Why, sir, there are five of them. If I kept half for myself till such time as poor Dill came home, the other half wouldn't be much divided among them ; but I reckoned, by what they let fall, it would satisfy them if it was paid regular."

Here Mr. Bartlett got up once more, and stood cogitating by the window. She was a fool ; but he did not despise, for he understood her.

He remained a few minutes turning over in his mind, between pity and amusement,

what to do for her. It was no business of his, as he assured himself, but yet he meant to take it in hand. A sudden thought seemed to strike him just as a cab passed the window. He tapped and stopped it.

“These *harpies* are gone out, you say. Where are your children ? ”

“Downstairs, sir.”

“I have a note to write. Suppose you fetch them up, and come back to me with your bonnet on.”

Her bonnet was so shabby ! She knew not whether to think most of it, or of Mr. Samuel Weller, who went to Doctors’ Commons to prove a will. Was Mr. Bartlett going to take her there ?

Mr. Bartlett was in the passage when she appeared with her children. He had a note in his hand, the ink of which was not dry. He had already opened the street door ; he moved to her to enter the cab, and straightway shut her in. “I have told

the man where to drive," he said. "The direction is on the note, also;" and before she had recovered from her astonishment, she had left her late uncle's house, never to enter it again.

It may be as well to draw a veil over the scene that ensued, when her aunts and uncles having returned, and waited dinner for her a reasonable time, began to suspect that she had escaped them. To obtain the half of everything, was the very least they had counted on. Some of them remained within, in case she should return; others went to Mr. Bartlett's office. Mr. Bartlett, they were informed, was engaged, and could not possibly see them, but they learned from his clerk that no person resembling Hannah Dill had called there that day.

The note that Mr. Bartlett had put into Mrs. Dill's hand was addressed, "Mrs. George Bartlett." Its contents may as well be given here.

“ DEAR LOVE,

“ You remember the scene I was describing to you last night? This is the heroine of it!

“ Her relations have arranged a plan for chousing her out of her money; and she is so *chousable*, that if left with them another day, she will be committed to it irretrievably. So, unknown to herself, I have caused her to run away from them. Tell her so, and tell her I say that, in justice to herself and her children, she must not decide to give anything to these people while under the constant pressure of their importunity.

“ I suppose, love, she can dine in the nursery? And then I want you, as soon as possible after, to let nurse take her in the omnibus up the new road to old Mrs. Prentice, who can lodge her, or recommend her to somebody who can. Tell her to

keep herself perfectly quiet till she hears from us.

“Thine,
“G. B.”

Mrs. Dill had been driven to Mr. Bartlett's house, and, in a high state of astonishment and perplexity, was waiting in a handsome dining-room, and keeping her children quiet with some difficulty, when a plump, pleasant-looking young woman came in, with the note open in her hand, and a face full of amusement and curiosity.

Mrs. Dill exclaimed that she hoped there was no mistake. And the lady answered cordially, “No mistake at all. I am Mrs. George Bartlett. I could not come down sooner; I was nursing my baby. Yours looks very young.”

“Only sixteen days, ma'am; and I believe that's hungry.”

“Poor little lamb!” said the other mother, and paused an instant, as if she hardly knew how to go on; then glancing at the note again, and catching an idea from it, she said, with a smile of amusement, “Well, suppose you come up to the nursery, and nurse it there, and see my baby. But he is a great big fellow, eight months old. Come, I will lead your little girl.”

The baby by this time was so *fractious*, that Mrs. Dill, in spite of her surprise, was very glad of any proposal which promised to allow of her satisfying its little requirements.

“The children are gone out for their walk,” observed Mrs. Bartlett, as they entered a light, roomy nursery. “Take the rocking-chair, and make yourself at home.”

Then, as soon as the baby was quiet and happy, and little Miss Dill had been propitiated with a sponge rusk and a rag doll,

Mrs. Bartlett said, "And so my husband has made you run away from your relations?"

"Ma'am!" exclaimed Mrs. Dill, "I do assure you I shouldn't think of such a thing."

"He says so," repeated Mrs. Bartlett, much enjoying her task.

"I never thought of such a thing!" the other exclaimed again.

"What did you think you were doing, then, when you got into the cab? Why did you do it?"

"Why, ma'am, because Mr. Bartlett told me."

Mrs. Bartlett now, at some length, explained the true state of the case, and soon observed that to know she was freed from these relations, and had got her future in her own hands, was a most welcome thought to Mrs. Dill. Her gratitude was fervent, but she could not help smiling

while she answered the questions of her hostess as to what had passed.

“I wonder you did not at least ask Mr. Bartlett where you were going.”

“Oh, ma’am, Mr. Bartlett is such a commanding gentleman! I couldn’t take the liberty.”

Mrs. Bartlett laughed. On reflection she laughed again. “Well, I suppose George has rather a commanding manner with strangers,” was her thought. “But, dear me! who would expect him to be obeyed and no questions asked!”

Mr. Bartlett was his wife’s humble servant. He was what is sometimes called an “out-sized man,” large-handed, heavy-footed, imposing in appearance, commanding in voice and gesture; a great dark, plain, downright, upright, kind-hearted personage.

It is said that in a thoroughly strong and good government the weight of the governing hand is least felt. Mr. Bartlett was

ruled with such utter ease and skill that he thought he was free.

In two hours' time Mrs. Dill had entered her lodgings at Pentonville, and was divesting herself of her aunt's gown and brooch, which, to prevent discovery, were to be returned by the Parcels Delivery Company.

Having no gown, she was obliged to stay indoors till a dressmaker could finish one for her. The shop-windows were not then, as now, full of "costumes" ready-made. Mrs. Dill and the nurse did some shopping on their way, and then, left alone with her babes, after the latter had withdrawn, she sat down to think over the astonishing events of the last twenty-four hours.

Now the long journey, and the excitement she had since gone through, began to tell upon her, and for several days she was glad to lie quietly on her bed, finding it enough to wonder at and be thankful for that she could procure whatever she wanted, and

civility too. For, as the landlady would sometimes remark to her, "A fat trouble, ma'am, is much better than a lean trouble; and however bad you feel, you know you've only to put your hand in your pocket, and send me out to buy the dinner."

Mrs. Dill soon constituted herself Mr. Bartlett's client, and taking, by his advice, or rather by his orders, several days to think the matter over, conveyed to him her deliberate wish that he would keep for her one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and divide the remainder of the income, with the furniture and clothes left by her deceased uncle, equally among his brothers and sisters.

Mr. Bartlett and the executor grumbled over this decision, but they carried it out, and of their own accord obtained from each of the recipients a written promise, never again to molest Hannah Dill in the possession of her property, and never at any

future time to apply to the said Hannah Dill for money, on any pretence whatever.

They were all satisfied, especially Hannah Dill, who read the signed paper, and heard that her relations were gone back to Suffolk, with almost incredulous joy.

Poor woman, she was now safe for awhile from the unkindness of her husband. She began to try hard to forgive him, being helped by the consciousness that he could not now be offending against her. Her natural jealousy as a wife was appeased ; she pitied him. He would surely now become a better man. In about five months he would have leave to communicate by letter with her. He should hear of her good fortune, and for the sake of this promise of secured future comforts, if not for her sake, surely he would reform.

She dreaded him sorely ; but what hope was there for her, excepting in thus hoping the best for him ? This crime had been

hateful to her, for the house he had robbed was that of her own dear lady, and there could be no doubt that he had obtained the knowledge which made this easy during the time when he had come courting there to her.

She had been somewhat of a wanderer. Born at Ipswich, she had moved with the family of her lady to Bristol; but Uzziah Dill belonged to Chester, and soon after her marriage with him, he had returned there on a promise of work, and there they had lived till he went off with the woman for whose sake he had for some time neglected her.

She was very weak and ill all that winter; she had gone through so much misery, that she could not soon recover. But she had the solace of her children, and having plenty of money and time, she employed herself mainly in making an abundant supply of comfortable and handsome clothing for them.

She went now and then to see Mrs. Bartlett, and observed how her children were dressed. "Mine have a right to the best," was her thought; "and, bless them, they shall have it, and the best of wholesome eating too."

Hannah Dill was a tall young woman, with a large frame, and dark hair and eyes. Her children were two delicate little fairies, flaxen-haired and blue-eyed, with all the pensive beauty of their father, but with little promise of strength and vigour.

When she knew that it was almost time for her husband to write to her, she wrote to his brother, Jacob Dill, and gave him her address. She little thought this would bring the whole tribe of the Dills upon her; she knew that they had not money enough to come, and they had been so unfriendly to her, that she supposed they would be ashamed to apply to her for money, even by letter.

She was quite mistaken, and soon found herself worse off with them than she had been with the Goodriches.

On the evening of the third day old Mrs. Dill appeared and established herself in Hannah Dill's lodgings, having borrowed the money for her journey, and expecting her daughter-in-law to return it forthwith. She brought her youngest girl with her, and said she would be very handy for taking care of the children.

Hannah Dill was at that time so restless with expectation, that she was even less able than usual to cope with these encroaching spirits. Everything seemed to depend on her husband's first letter. Was he penitent? was he hardened? How would he write, and what should she reply?

It is probable that she would have succumbed, and perhaps have even agreed to receive Uzziah's drunken old father, but for a blow that she was not prepared for,

and which hurt her more sorely than all that had gone before.

Jacob Dill wrote, for he said he was ashamed to show her his face. He was the only one of the Dills that had a spark of spirit or good feeling. It was better she should know it, he wrote. Uzziah had written, had written the first day that he was allowed. Of course he had not heard, when he did it, of his wife's having got the money. "You see, Hannah, they are only allowed to write to their wives, or their families if they have no wife. He told the governor he had a wife; and I am sorry to let it out to you, for I know you'll be hurt, but he wrote to *her*. Why, she was with him at his trial, and called Mrs. Dill and all; and he told her how he wanted to hear on her, and asked if her baby were born, and she were to write back as though she was his wife. It was not at all sure as he should be long at

Dartmoor ; he might get sent over the sea. And, oh ! would she write off directly ? It was a shame, but he never mentioned you at all.”

What people have been taught how to do, they should be able to do. Hannah Dill ran away again.

Old Mrs. Dill had, now she had come to London, two ambitions. She wanted to see the Crystal Palace, and also to see Smithfield.

She accomplished the last while her daughter-in-law, cold as a stone after this blow, sat shivering in silence by the fire. She accomplished the second a few days after, and took her daughter. When the poor wife heard the door shut after her, and knew that she would be away for hours, she lifted up her face, that was full of moody and brooding thought, asked the landlady to watch her children, and went out. She came back in a cab, with three

large boxes ; and, some hours after that, left the house again, with those same boxes and her children, and a hearty hug from the landlady, whose claims she more than satisfied.

When old Mrs. Dill came back, she found, instead of her daughter-in-law, certain articles of clothing laid out for her acceptance—a brown paper parcel, containing money enough to take her and her daughter home, and a letter, setting forth that her daughter-in-law had left London for good, and she would hear from her and see her no more.

CHAPTER IV.

GREAT schemes may be reasoned out and great sacrifices already made in thought while, leaning her face on her hand, a heart-sick woman sits brooding, with her feet on the fender.

Uzziah Dill's wife had tried hard to forgive him, and, while at peace in present freedom, had persuaded herself that she need not tremble, thinking of the day that would bring her into his presence and under his dominion again.

Uzziah Dill's wife now gave him up for good and all. She suffered in so doing from no sense of wrong, any more than of

unkindness towards him. Clearly he did not want her, and he had sinned against her in that one only way which made her, by all law, divine and human, free to depart and be loosed from him for ever.

But then she wanted to save her children, not only from the disadvantage and disgrace of knowing that they had a convict for their father, but from that acquaintance with wickedness, evil living, and shame that they could not escape if she went into court so soon as he was free, and laid all her wrongs open in order to obtain a divorce.

How could she save these that were her all—these, so much dearer to her than herself—the costly and consoling fruit of her great mistake? For their sake, in spite of the sorrow and fear it had wrought her, she always found it impossible to wish the past undone.

If she was, indeed, never to retrieve the

mistake, could she not still so act as to take all its weight upon herself? She longed, as true love must, to shield her children from the cruel robbery of affection that she had proved—from exposure to contaminating examples, from want and blame.

To this end, she effaced herself utterly, and left her name behind her. When she was again seen by one who knew her, she showed herself that she might learn how to deprive the vicious father of his children, to secure which she was willing to rob herself of them also.

At first, restless and wretched, she could not mature her plan, but journeyed from one little seaside place to another, never calling herself by her husband's name, but using any other, indifferently, that came into her head.

Mr. Bartlett, during those three or four months, heard frequently from Hannah Dill,

and forwarded money to her as she required it. Before he got rid of the whining old mother-in-law, and the helpless young girl, he had wished many times that he had never taught her to run away.

And then there was a drunken father-in-law, who tormented him for more money, and said it was on his conscience that Hannah ought to be advertised for, and made to come back to her own husband's relations, that were so willing to look after her and the children.

Mr. Bartlett said they might advertise if they liked, and make her come back if they could. He added, in such a convincing way, that he did not care what they did, that in the end they believed him, and gave him up, as the "wrong-headedest" and "hard-heartedest" gentleman they had ever met with. They then departed.

At last, but not for some time after this, Mrs. Dill appeared one morning at Mr.

Bartlett's office, sent up a note, and was straightway admitted to an interview.

It was evident that she had gone through great trouble ; her eyes were hollow, and her features thin. Her children had both been ill, she told him, but she acknowledged nothing else afflictive, and after a few commonplaces of condolence from him, she broke in with—

“I came to ask your opinion, sir, about some things I don't fairly understand.”

“Well, Mrs. Dill, I am at your service.”

“I wish, sir, to know how people came first by their surnames. I have made out, by a book of history, that we did not always have such.”

“Certainly not.”

“People took them, I fare to think, mainly for convenience.”

“Quite true.”

He then went over familiar ground with her—described how some names grew out

of the trades of those first called by them, others came from the father's Christian name, others, again, from localities.

"But you do not need that I should tell you this," he broke off to say; "you have studied the subject, I find."

"Yes, sir," she answered. "Then what they took for convenience, I should say they may change for convenience."

"They very commonly do—for the sake of some property, for instance, left on that condition."

"I know it, sir. Well, it would hurt my conscience to live in a lie. If I call myself by another name than poor Dill's, do I lie? Mayn't I take a name for myself, as my fore-ancestors did?"

"That depends, I should say, partly on the motive. If you meant, by such an act, to prevent your husband from claiming you and his children when he gets free, and also to keep from him, if you can, the money

that you have inherited, and to which he will have a clear right——”

Mrs. Dill’s silence appeared to show that she did so intend.

“It would be every way wrong,” he presently added. “It would deprive him of his wife, while, being unable to prove your death, he could not marry again.”

“No, but that would be no worse for him than for me. I could never marry again, either.”

“You propose to interfere with your husband’s clear legal rights.”

“Sir, sir!” she interrupted. “Of course a man must be expected to take the man’s side. I don’t resent that; so it is, and always will be, just as sure as that a woman will take against a woman. But if he has behaved to me so bad and so base, that no laws—not God’s, nor even man’s—would give me back to him——”

“Mrs. Dill, you must tell me something more.”

Mrs. Dill did tell more. For the first and last time she unfolded her many wrongs, and told all. This was not a common case, and the husband had not cared to conceal either his unfaithfulness or his cruelty. She ended, with many heart-sick tears, "I never will live with him again. He may claim me, but he shall never get me. Rather than that, I'll spend every shilling of my money to get free." ("Your money!" thought Mr. Bartlett.) "I must and will save his children and mine. And that's why I want to have another name, sir; and you, having treated me almost as if I was a friend——"

"You want a friend's opinion?"

"I want to know, first, if I can be punished for doing it."

"Why, my good woman, of course not, excepting by detection."

"And would you tell me, as a friend, should I be living in a lie? Is it a moral wrong to take a new name?"

“I answer as a friend, that I think not. But it would be a great risk; because it would be to your husband’s interest to search for you.”

“Yes, sir, and if he found me he would be master as to the spending of the money, or I should lead a terrible life with him.”

“The money is, in fact, now lying in my hands. The executor did wish to sell the property, and it is to be reinvested.”

“You will not let me have even half?”

“No, because you cannot give me a receipt that would not still leave me liable to have your husband come upon me in the event of your death. Mr. Gordon cannot give it to you either.”

“No, sir. Mr. Gordon was saying, though, that the money might be invested in a way not generally allowed—laid out, I mean, in stocking a shop.”

Mr. Bartlett here looked steadily into Hannah Dill’s clear, honest eyes. “I half expected this,” he thought. “Well, Mrs. Dill?”

“ He said, if I could keep a shop—— ”

“ Yes, if you could keep a shop ? ”

“ But I said I was afraid ; and if I lost the money, Dill would be so angry.”

“ It was to be kept under your own—I mean your husband’s name ? ”

“ I never mentioned to him about going by another.”

“ Humph ! ”

“ He said my husband could not object nor come on you or him afterwards, even if any money was lost ; on the other hand, I might make money by trade, and that surely would not belong to Dill ? ”

“ What did you answer ? ”

“ I did not take to the notion, and I was thinking about changing my name.”

“ Oh, that was all. Well, now, as regards Mr. Gordon’s remarks, you tell him from me that he had better look out.”

“ But I did say that I was afraid to keep a shop.”

“No matter; tell him I say he had better look out. But as to changing your name, I believe I should change mine under like circumstances.”

“Oh, thank you, sir, for saying it; now, indeed, I fare to see it cannot be wrong.”

“But you must remember, Mrs. ——” He paused half an instant, wondering what name she would take.

“Sir, my name is Snaith,” she exclaimed. So quick to take the advice she had longed for, so afraid some one should enter and hear her old name.

A clerk at that instant did enter.

“But you must remember, Mrs. Snaith,” he replied, slowly and steadily; then paused to receive and return a message, and when his clerk had shut the door, went on, “You must remember, Mrs. Snaith, that you have many years yet of freedom before your husband can come and take the income.”

“But I have to hide all from his children, and I want to begin from the first.”

“Then begin by taking leave of me.”

“Sir, sir, I mean to do it, though you have been the best and kindest friend I have had for a long time.”

He then explained to her how she could receive her income at a distance from the place where she lived.

She went away, and the next afternoon Mr. Gordon desired to speak with him.

(“Oh, my prophetic soul!”) “Well, show him up,” said Mr. Bartlett.

Mr. Gordon explained that he had come about Mrs. Dill’s affairs.

“Where is Mrs. Dill?”

“She is gone back to the seaside, sir, with fifty pounds in her pocket as I drew for her.”

“You seem to have had some conversation with her, Mr. Gordon.”

“Well, I have, sir. But Goodrich’s niece

is that soft and that straightforward, that she's hardly to be trusted with her own interests."

Mr. Bartlett repeated to the executor that he had better "look out."

The other replied that he had looked out, he had been looking out for some time; and as to the matter of the reinvestment, he had a great wish to spend a portion of the money in buying the goodwill of a business that he had heard of, and in the stock of a man about to retire—"a friend of mine, at Bristol," he began—"a very honest man."

"At Bristol?"

"Ay, sir. A long way off, but a very honest man."

"Hannah Dill has no wish to keep a shop."

"She have altered her mind, sir. She have taken into consideration that I, being an old friend and fellow-townsman of

Goodrich's, and, as I have said to her, I know he would wish it——”

“Now, what might you mean in this case by an honest man ? ”

“Well, I might have said to an old friend, ‘Jem Gravison, I am in a fix with poor Goodrich's niece that have married a convict, and have been ill-used by him in a shameful way. Poor Goodrich,’ I might have said, ‘have made me his executor, to take care of his money, and he left word that it might be laid out in buying the stock and the goodwill of a business, shoe trade preferred.’ I might have said, ‘Jem Gravison, have you such to sell ? ’ and being a right-down honest man, he might have made answer, ‘Old boy, I have not.’ ”

At this unexpected conclusion of the sentence, Mr. Bartlett looked up, surprised.

“But yet, you see, it's a fine thing to carry out the blessed laws of the land, and the provisions of poor Goodrich's will ; and

when me and him had corresponded together, he might have said, ‘It’s true I did mean to sell, as witness my advertisement in the paper;’ and if as well as that he had said—which he may have done—that if he sold to a worse than widow for more than orphans he would take no advantage—me knowing that well enough before—I should call him an honest man.”

“And you really mean to tell me,” said Mr. Bartlett, with a stolid face, “that you think this man’s shop and trade and stock will be a good investment?”

“I do, sir. And I mean to have everything properly gone into—the books, the vally of the goods, bad debts, and what not.”

“You had better take a little time to consider this.”

“Yes, sir; and I shall want it done in the most legal way. Nothing like fencing yourself round with the law, sir. The will

says a part of the property. It never specifies what part."

"No."

"It may be anything short of the whole, then."

Mr. Bartlett, being a little out of temper, answered shortly that it might.

His client took some days to consider, some more to decide how to act, but in the end the stock-in-trade, shop, and goodwill of a certain shoe trade, lately the property of James Gravison, were duly bought and paid for by the executor of the late H. Goodrich, on behalf of his niece and her husband, the said niece to keep the shop.

Mr. Bartlett did not much like the affair, he therefore took the more care to conduct it with all legal formality; and when all was arranged, it seemed to him to be rather a suspicious circumstance that the executor had left that precise portion of property in his hands which paid what must be called

hush-money to the Goodrich family, and which, as Mr. Bartlett remarked, would of course be claimed by the convict husband when he came forth, the wife's resolution not binding him at all to dispose of it thus.

"I have not mentioned that to Goodrich's niece yet, sir," said Mr. Gordon.

Mr. Bartlett said nothing; he had noticed the peculiar emphasis on the word *yet*.

Mr. Gordon informed him, with a certain open cheerfulness of manner, that he had caused Hannah Dill's name to be painted up on the shop; he also pulled out a Bristol paper, wherein Hannah Dill advertised herself as having bought the stock of the late Thomas Gravison, of his brother James Gravison, of the United States of America, and Hannah Dill hoped, by unremitting attention to business, to merit the patronage of the public.

"That advertisement goes into unneces-

sary details," said Mr. Bartlett. "Did Mrs. Dill indite it?"

"Well, no, sir; she have not that turn for business that I could wish. At present she do not intend to serve in the shop herself, the children being still so sadly." So saying, Mr. Gordon gravely folded up the paper and put it in his pocket.

In the mean time Mrs. Snaith, as she must now be called, quite unaware of the various manœuvres being carried out for her benefit,—Mrs. Snaith went back to her children with fifty pounds in her pocket, besides the money she had obtained by the sale of all her best and handsomest clothes. She bought for the two little ones some very handsome frocks, ribbons, and toys, spent two or three days in picking every mark from their clothes and her own, then packed all up in boxes, with the name of Mrs. Snaith on them, and departed, not leaving even at her lodgings

any address, or account of what she might be going to do.

The children were too young to imperil the success of her scheme; neither could talk. They did not know their own names, nor where they had come from.

In a short time the convict husband's day came for writing again. He knew now, through his brother, of his wife's good fortune, therefore, of course, his letter this time was to her.

It had been such an astonishing piece of news that it had wrought in him a certain change. He had a profound contempt for his wife mainly on account of the love which had induced her to throw herself away upon *him*. He believed he had only to flatter her to have back her heart.

He wanted her to believe that he was a reformed character. His letter, therefore, besides being affectionate in language,

was full of cant, such cant as is commonly learned in a prison. He meant, when he had a chance, to show what a changed character he was; he even gave her religious and moral advice, as one already in such matters her superior. Then, after lamenting that this money had not come in time to prevent him from throwing himself away, he proceeded to assure his wife that he would make her a happy woman yet, and with unparalleled impudence he continued, that he knew it was hard on her to be away from him so long, but she was not the woman, he was sure, to go out of the paths of virtue, and she must take care of the money, and keep herself respectable for his sake.

Uzziah Dill sent this letter through his brother, as he had done the first. He hoped to write to each of the women once a year, and to keep it secret from both that this was the case. So, not knowing

his wife's address, he trusted to his brother, directing to him and asking him to read the letter before sending it on, that his dear parents might know how he was.

Jacob Dill saw the game his brother was trying to play, and felt what a bad fellow he was; but he justified what Hannah Dill had said. He took the man's side, being swayed also by the desire to pacify and conciliate the woman who had brought money into the Dill family.

Jacob Dill sent the letter to Mr. Gordon, asking him to let Hannah have it. Mr. Gordon, who exhibited great fearlessness in acting for others, returned it, informing him that he did not know where Mrs. Dill was, and that they need not trouble themselves to send any more letters to him, as she had means of drawing money without letting him know where she lived.

This was very bad news for the Dills. That Mr. Gordon could not send on the

letter was possible, that he would not was evident. In fact, so bad was the news considered, that the drunken old father was sobered by it for the time being, and shaking his head over this “dispensation of Providence,” actually went to work at his trade again.

Mr. Gordon did not inform them that he had copied the letter; he did, however, muttering to himself as he folded it and put it in his desk, “For Goodrich’s niece is that soft, that she may relent towards the convict after all. This’ll help to keep her straight towards doing what’s right by her uncle.”

CHAPTER V.

IT was now the middle of July ; the inhabitants of a beautiful little seaside place in the south-west of England were cleaning their windows, hanging up their fresh white curtains, and putting out placards of the lodgings they had to let.

There was a smell of paint and tar about ; the pleasure boats had just been put into first-rate order, and run up on the beach in a tempting phalanx, while the sentimental or patriotic names on their little pennons hung almost unmoved in the sunny air. The landladies grumbled, as they always did every year, said “ how short

their season was, and that the visitors were long of coming."

The prettiest little terrace boasted as yet of but one lodger, and she, her landlady said, was but a servant—a nurse with some children. "However," continued the good woman, "those that sent her must have sent good money with her, for she pays like her betters, I will say. But she keeps herself mighty close, and has no notion of being asked any questions." This she said to her next-door neighbour, as the two stood to gossip on their respective door-steps. "And so particular about the children's eating! She's almost worse than a lady at that."

In about a week matters mended. The neighbour let her drawing-room floor, several families appeared on the beach, flower-girls began to pervade it, a band played in the evening, and more bathing-machines were pushed down. Soon there

were many groups of children dotted about in cheerful proximity to one another, some with nurses, some with mothers, and they all pleased themselves with the same time-honoured toys, buckets, and wooden spades.

A very respectable-looking and plainly dressed nurse was sitting one morning on the beach a little apart from any of these groups. She was at work, just beyond high-water mark, and two lovely little children were playing beside her. One, scarcely a year old, seated on the nurse's gown, was complacently patting the shingle with a wooden spade; the other had a small cart, and had attained to such a degree of intelligence as enabled her to fill it with shells and seaweed, and drag it on a little way, when it generally turned over, and the same operation had to be performed again.

These children were fair, of very refined appearance; rather delicate, with pure complexions, deep-blue eyes, and black lashes.

Some ladies who lodged next door had several times noticed them and their nurse. They evidently had no one else with them. She always kept them delicately clean in their dress. In the morning they wore flapping white sun-bonnets, but in the evening, after their early tea, she used to dress them up in broidered frocks, and take them forth upon the little parade, in all their infantine bravery of pink or blue sashes and ostrich-feathers.

“That woman looks as proud of the children as if they were her own,” observed one of the ladies; “their parents may well trust her with them.”

“And how very plainly and neatly she dresses,” replied the other. “I wish any one of our servants was like her. A clean print gown in the morning, a neat coburg in the evening. The children’s dress looks twice as handsome, hers being so unpretending. I wonder whose children they are.”

The nurse, Mrs. Snaith, not at all aware of the notice and approval she had attracted, seated herself the following morning nearly in her previous place, while, in a profound calm, the tide was softly coming up.

She looked almost happy, for she was beginning to feel safe, and accustomed to her new name. Her position as nurse to the children had been taken for granted the moment she appeared ; she had already overheard remarks made on their lovely and refined appearance, and her own evident respectability.

This pleased her. She liked also to observe the beauty of the shore, and went on leisurely working, and watching the water and the two graceful little creatures beside her.

No air stirred but such as was set in motion by the slight action of the oncoming wave ; and presently, in the perfect calm of the morning, a sea mist began to rise, and

as she looked, the somewhat distant bathing-machines were already in it.

Presently she herself was in it, and all the fishing craft hanging about in the harbour looked as faint as grey ghosts ; but each boat, being clearly reflected in the water, seemed to stand up an unnatural height—it was hard to distinguish it from its image. The mist did not reach very high ; all above was blue and full of light. She put down her work to look, and, half unconsciously, to listen. A crier was pacing up and down the little terrace behind her, with his bell. “Oh yes ! oh yes ! a bracelet was lost on the beach—a gold bracelet in the form of a snake.” The nurse turned, and, as a flat, neutral-tinted outline, could just discern the figure of the crier, as he passed out of hearing. “Oh yes ! oh yes !” she heard him begin again, and then his voice became faint in the distance, and gave way to other sounds.

There was a strange kind of creaking and a flapping over the water, but nothing could be seen ; the fishing-boats were quite invisible.

It interested her inquiring mind to notice now how all outlines were melting away into the mist. What could that creaking be ? There was nothing to make it. Why, yes, there was ! An enormous high pole, all aslant, was pushing on right towards her, and two vast sheets hung aloft behind it. Why, this was a ship. She could see the two gaunt masts now, and the ropes, some hanging slack, and the mainsail flapping and coming down. Sailors were swarming about up there, and now the beachmen came running on to meet the vessel.

The tide was almost at the height, and this must be the coal brig that had been expected, coming up to be beached.

The tall bowsprit appeared to be nearly

hanging over her, before the beachmen got up to the brig's bows ; and then there was shouting and splashing in the shingle, and she rose and moved backward with the children, for the almost formless wave was washing up close to her feet.

“ Oh yes ! oh yes ! ” repeated the crier, now become audible again. “ Oh yes ! a gold bracelet was lost—a bracelet in the form of a snake, with pearls for eyes. Whoever would bring the same to the hotel on the east cliff, should receive two guineas reward.”

She sat down higher up on the shingle, and hearkened as the crier’s message waxed loud, and then faint again ; and she watched how the heavy rope from the brig was made fast to a clumsy wooden windlass, and how, with stamping and chanting, the beachmen began to turn this round. All was new and fresh to her ; and the mist, which generally turns with the tide, had already

fallen back a little, dropping behind the nearest fishing-vessels, and giving them and their shadows back to the sunshine, before she tired of gazing and, chancing to look round, noticed on her right, and almost close at hand, one of the ladies next door, who, seated also, was smiling on the elder child and trying to attract her.

“She is not shy, ma’am,” said Mrs. Snaith; “she will come to you. Shake hands with the lady, missy.”

Steps were now heard behind, crashing through the shingle.

“Mrs. Snaith,” cried a young girl, “mother says she can get no milk this morning; and what is she to make instead of the pudding, for your little ladies?”

“Dear me!” exclaimed the nurse, “no milk? And so fanciful as the dears are! You must tell your mother to boil them each an egg, and to mind they are as fresh as fresh.”

“They are delicate ?” asked the lady.

“Yes, ma’am, bless them ; very delicate.”

In the mean time the elder child had broken loose from the stranger’s caresses.

“Pretty dears !” said the lady. “What is their name ?”

“That one’s name is Amabel.”

“Oh, I meant their surname.”

A sudden bound at the nurse’s heart ; for an instant a pause. Then, recovering herself, “Missy, missy !” she cried, starting up, “don’t go too near the edge ; you’ll wet your precious feet.—Now, to think of that question coming so soon, and me not ready for it !” she muttered ; and she hastened along the shingle with the younger child in her arms ; and, setting her down, took up the elder, who, by various acts of infantile rebellion, did what she could to continue the fascinating play of slapping the water with a long banner of dulse.

In the mean time the little one filled

both her hands with what she could find, and the two were shortly carried up by Mrs. Snaith, one under each arm.

“I must take them in at once, ma’am,” she remarked, as she hastily passed the lady. “Missy is so wet.”

Her face was flushed, and when she got to a safe distance from her questioner, she sat down to take a short rest.

The mist had almost melted away. How grand the brig looked! She thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than the shape of her bows, with reflections of the receding water wavering all over them.

Something nearer than the wave was sparkling. The baby had something fast in her dimpled fist, and was recklessly striking the stones with it, uttering little cries of pleasure when she saw it flash as she knocked it about.

A costly toy! The gold bracelet, the snake with pearls for eyes!

That same evening, when Mrs. Snaith had put her two little nurslings to bed, she left them in charge of her landlady's daughter, and, dressed in her neatest and plainest habiliments, set forth to find the hotel on the east cliff, and return the bracelet to its owner.

There was never seen a better embodiment of all that a servant ought to be (from the mistress's point of view), than she appeared on that occasion. She was very desirous to have certain things taken for granted, that she might be asked no questions. "Are these your children?" would have been an awkward inquiry. She had made it a very unlikely one. She was so unassuming, so quiet, so respectable in her manner, so unfashionable and economical in her attire, that the position in which she stood toward them had appeared to be evident to every one; but during the whole of this evening walk, even to the moment

when she found herself sitting in the hall of the hotel, while a waiter went upstairs to announce her errand, she kept revolving in her mind the question of the morning, and wishing she could decide on a name for the children.

For, as has before been said, this woman in somewhat humble life, and used to common fashions, had thoughts not common, not humble. She had indulged a high ambition. A form of self-sacrifice that most mothers would shrink from as intolerable, had fully shaped itself in her mind, and become a fixed intention. She had deliberately planned to wait on her own children as their nurse, as such to bring them up, and never let them know that they were hers.

For the next eleven years at least she could bring them up in comfort, and educate them well; after that, she had every hope that their wretched father would not be able to

find her. But, lest such should be the case, she meant to give them a name different from her own, almost at once; to begin to earn money, so that before there was a chance of a ticket of leave for her husband, she could put them to a good school, and having found a guardian for them, leave money enough in his hands to last till they were of an age to go out themselves as governesses. Having made this arrangement, she intended to leave them, deliberately deciding to hear of them and to see them no more.

She would then, indeed, have lost her children. If she were unhappy enough to be found by their wretched father, she would tell him so.

With her mind full of all this, she sat in the hall of the hotel, and her only half-attentive eyes rested on some boxes, with a name painted on them—

“ Captain de Berenger, Madras, N.I.”

The owner was evidently on his way to the east, and the name of the ship he was to sail in was painted on them also.

Presently a lady and gentleman came down, and began to excuse themselves for having kept her waiting, on the ground that they were in a hurry—just off.

They seemed to be a newly married couple, and while the lady expressed her pleasure at getting the bracelet back, the gentleman was evidently fumbling in his purse for the reward.

“It seemed so hard to lose it,” said the lady, clasping the trinket on slowly, as if to give her husband time. “I had quite given it up, for we are off almost directly by the express for Southampton. We cannot wait.—Tom !”

Tom was still not ready. “What did we say ?” he whispered. “Two, or three ?”

“Sir,” cried Mrs. Snaith, now perceiving the state of affairs, “indeed I could not think of such a thing.”

“Oh, but we offered a reward!” exclaimed the lady. “Captain de Berenger offered a reward. Pray take it.”

“No, ma’am; I don’t need it. Indeed, you are kindly welcome.”

“Well, at least shake hands, then, and thank you very much indeed;” and all their boxes being already placed on a fly, the lady and gentleman drove off in a hurry, nodding and repeating their thanks till the fly turned a corner.

“De Berenger,” thought Mrs. Snaith; “now, that name seems as if it really would do. It has a kind of a foreign sound. It’s uncommon. I fare to take to it, and it’s not too uncommon neither. There’s De Berenger, the baker, at Bristol, and there’s a shop at Pentonville with that name on the door. These people, too, are off to India; they’ll never know I borrowed their name from their boxes. I shall not forget how it was spelt, nor how it goes. And I must be

quick, for to-morrow the man will come round again to print the visitors' names in the paper. Mine must not go in again 'Mrs. Snaith and *two children.*'"

So that evening Mrs. Snaith overhauled the children's toys. On one little wooden spade she printed in clear letters, "Amabel de Berenger;" on the other, "Delia de Berenger."

Her eldest child she had named after the young lady whose maid and reader she had been, and had always called her "Missy," as she had called her namesake. Her younger child she had named Delia, partly in remembrance of a tender little song that her husband had sung during the few kind days that had followed their marriage, partly because she had a natural ear for pleasant sounds; and she felt that this now disregarded name was a very beautiful one. Their baptismal names, therefore, the children retained, and received the new surname of De Berenger.

The remainder of the evening she spent in marking some of their pinafores and other clothing ; and this done, without any assertion of their name, she let things take their course.

It was only a very few days after this that Mrs. Snaith was startled by an elderly man, who, stopping short in front of her, accosted her with, “ Well, and how are you, ma’am ? Finely, I hope. You look so.”

“ Mr. Gordon ! ”

“ Don’t be startled,” he continued ; “ there’s not a soul within earshot—not even my friend that came with me. I wouldn’t go to your lodgings. We have been about on the beach looking for you. Nobody in life ”—seeing her look disturbed —“ nobody in life know your address but me only. I said in life, for we have no reason to think that H. Goodrich know what I am about to do—I wish he did—and

thereby you may be sure it's all right and straight."

Mrs. Snaith said she was sure of that; and he sat down beside her on the shingle, admired the children, one of whom was asleep, and the other eating some luncheon, and then went on—

"Now, look here, H. Goodrich's niece. I told you the will would allow of my buying a stock-in-trade on your behalf, and I sent you the document here to be signed as legal as could be. It cost twenty pound, that transaction did. I bought the stock. 'Twill cost you seven pound ten more, for I had to go to Bristol on your affairs and come here this day, which I cannot afford on my own cost, as H. Goodrich was well aware."

"I'll pay it, sir, and thank you too."

"Well, having bought this stock-in-trade for you, I have nothing more to do with that part of the trust money (as I hope),

the part that bring in one hundred and fifty pound a year. But a party that knew your uncle, and have come down here—and, let me say, would on no hand wrong the widow and the orphan—he have something to say to you. You know what *payable to bearer* means?"

"Yes, I believe I do."

"Such things you know of, as foreign bonds. Say United States bonds. Those are very good securities, and are made payable to bearer. They'll pass from hand to hand like a bank-note; you just show 'em and you take your money. That would be the best thing for you to have."

"Better than the stock-in-trade?"

"Better by half."

"But, bless you, sir, why did you buy the stock-in-trade for me, then; and make out it was such a fine thing to do?"

"Why did I? That's where it is. That's where it is, H. Goodrich's niece. And this

I call you, seeing you want to keep your name to yourself. You couldn't get at your money, you perceive, before I did that."

"No. But can I now?"

"I should calculate you bought the stock-in-trade, meaning, in the way of trade, to sell it again. Retail or wholesale—or wholesale," he repeated presently, when she remained silent.

"Well, sir, I was afraid the person you put in to sell would be a great expense to me. Then you think, if I gain ever so little, I ought to sell wholesale if I get a chance?"

"You won't gain anything at all. A document being wanted, you'll lose several pound. And *I've* no advice to give you, H. Goodrich's niece." The twinkle in his eyes seemed to show joy and triumph. He beckoned to a man near at hand. "There he is. If you want to have what

you paid for the stock-in-trade (all but what I specified) in your own hand, payable to bearer, United States bonds, there's the man that will buy your shoes of you, and that have a document in his pocket, and a ink-bottle and pen, that you may sign handy. All I need add is, I wish H. Goodrich was here to see his money rescued from the grasp of a convict."

"Are you sure it's legal, and won't get you into any trouble?" exclaimed H. Goodrich's niece, when the other man had come up, and from a bundle of papers was sorting out one for her to sign.

"Well, so far as we can make out, it is. He"—pointing out his friend—"he have no call to quake, and I expect the thing will hold. All I shall ask is, H. Goodrich's niece, that you keep your distance, and never let me know anything about you. I can get into no trouble for eleven year at the least. If I should then (and not

likely), you'll promise me you'll always, wherever you be, take the *Suffolk Chronicle*; and if I'm in life then, and you see an advertisement in it letting you know I've got into trouble, then you'll have to write to me. But I'm not afraid. There's a pretty little income—over thirty pounds a year—left in my hands, and if a certain party made himself unpleasant and wanted the rest of it, he could be threatened with a suit in the Divorce Court, and I think he'll be glad enough to let things be."

"The purchase was legal, ma'am," observed the stranger; "your executor has the papers to prove it."

"And when our friend is going to take the boots and shoes is neither here nor there," proceeded Mr. Gordon.

"You'll take notice, though," continued the stranger, "that bonds and what not, made payable to bearer, are in one sense very ticklish property to keep. If they get

burnt you've no remedy ; if you lose them you've no remedy ; or lose one, and whoever finds it holds it and gets the money. And I don't mean to say as you can always reckon on the same sum for them, not to a shilling or even a pound, because the dollar varies slightly in value, you know."

"I'll sign the paper," said Hannah Dill at last. "I fare to understand that I'm a free woman for good and all, and I'm deeply obliged to you both."

CHAPTER VI.

AND now the document which sold her stock-in-trade to J. Gravison having been duly signed by Hannah Dill (who for many a long day never used that name again), a large, awkward-shaped bundle of papers having been consigned to her, and Mr. Gordon having again remarked "that where those boots and shoes were going, and where the purchaser might be going, was neither here nor there," the two friends made as if they would withdraw; but this did not at all suit the notions of the convict's wife.

She longed to give them at least a dinner, and after a little pressing they agreed that

she should ; and she left them on the beach, while she hastened to her lodgings with her children and the papers, where, having secured the latter, and taken out money for her executor's expenses, she got her landlady to take charge for a few hours of the former.

“ Certain,” quoth the landlady, “ I'll see to your little ladies, ma'am, with the greatest pleasure ; don't you worrit about them.”

So Mrs. Dill came forth again, and conducted the two friends to a respectable public-house, much frequented by sea captains and farming people.

Here, while they sat in a green bower out-of-doors and smoked, she ordered and assisted to produce such a dinner as might be a credit to her taste and her generosity, and a thing to be remembered ever after.

It was not ready till half-past three, the two guests having been more than ready for some time.

First appeared dishes for which the place was famous—soused mackerel at one end, and at the other hot lobsters, served whole, with brown bread and butter and bottled porter.

After this came a rumpsteak pie with fresh young onions, also a green goose, and abundance of peas and kidney potatoes. With this course the company drank beer. One of the guests observed with conviction that even a Guildhall dinner could not beat this, and the other remarked that it was what he called “a square meal.”

Next came an apricot pudding with a jug of cream, and a dish of mince-pies, blue with the spiral flame of the lighted rum they were served in.

All this took time, but at every fresh call on their efforts the guests fell to again, nothing daunted; there was no flagging but in the conversation.

With the cheese and dessert appeared

port, and the affair concluded with more pipes in the arbour, and some gin and water.

It was a great success.

In the cool of the evening they said they must depart, and each giving an arm to H. Goodrich's niece, they walked in high good humour, and very steadily on the whole, to the railway station, she seeing them off, with many thanks on her part for their kindness, and on theirs for her hospitality.

Mrs. Snaith then hastened to her lodgings. Already her peculiar position had made her cautious and reserved. She seldom began a conversation, or volunteered any information, however trifling, which gave others an opening for asking questions.

She found the children asleep and well, thanked her landlady, and, seeing her weekly bill on the table, paid it, and said she should stay on.

The landlady retired. She began to under-

stand her lodger; she found her a just woman to reckon with, though not one to waste words.

“Why, if she bought her words by the dozen,” thought the good woman, “and was always considering how to use them to the best advantage, and make them go as far as they would, she could not any way be more mean with them.”

Mrs. Snaith, asking no questions, did not hear how much “the little ladies” had been admired that day, nor how much curiosity they had excited.

For the small place being very full of visitors, the landlady and her young daughter had amused themselves during their lodger’s absence by sitting in the open window of her pleasant parlour, which was downstairs, and watching “the company,” while little Miss Amabel and Miss Delia played about the room with their toys.

It was a pride and joy to them to see the

place so crowded, and to observe the newcomers looking about for lodgings.

Little Amabel in the mean time was setting out a row of wooden tea things on the sill of the window, and the baby Delia, who could but just walk alone, trotted up to her to admire, and presently began to toss some of them out on to the pavement below.

This was a fine thing to have done, and the little creatures looked on with deep interest, while the landlady's daughter, called 'Ria, went down the steps of the street door, and fetched them in again.

Little Delia, having tasted the joy of this small piece of mischief, now threw out her shore-spade, while Amabel, not to be outdone, filled a toy wooden bucket with the animals from a Noah's ark, and one by one sent them after it; the long-suffering 'Ria going out, with unwise patience, to collect and bring them back, as if the

vagaries of children were no more under human control than are the rising of the wind or the changes of the moon.

“How tiresome gentlefolk’s children are, mother!” she said at last, when, to the amusement of the ladies next door, who were reading novels on a bench, she came forth for the eleventh time and picked up two elephants and a canary; “why, they give ten times the trouble that we do when we’re little.”

“Ay,” answered the mother, with a sage air of conviction, “it’s all very well to say they’re the same flesh and blood as we are; there’s that difference, anyhow. You won’t easy deceive me; I’d undertake to tell a gentleman’s child by it anywhere. They’ve no responsibility in ‘em either. Why, a big child five year old will run away from her nurse, and her nurse just has to run after her, while at that age you took the baby as then was on the beach, and had Tom to take care of with you.”

“But they’re minded,” said the girl; “that’s why they can’t seem to grow any responsibility of their own.”

“There!” said one of the ladies to the other, “that girl is putting away the Noah’s ark and giving the child a doll to play with. I wonder she did not think of doing so before. Look! there comes the spade again.”

Two lovely little faces looked out as before, and some infantile babble was heard, but no landlady’s daughter came forth to bring it in; so, lest it should be lost to its small possessor, one of the ladies, before she went indoors, picked it up, intending to bring it to the window.

“Amabel de Berenger!” she exclaimed, reading the name. “Why, Mary, these children are De Berengers! I wonder which branch of the family they belong to?”

“Not to the old baronet’s,” observed the other. “His sons are unmarried; at least,

Tom de Berenger was only married a few weeks ago, and was here till lately on his wedding tour."

"They may be strangers from another neighbourhood," observed the first. "The name is not so very uncommon;" and she came to the outside of the window, giving the spade to its dimpled owner, remarking to the landlady that she was intimate with one family of De Berengers, and asking where these children came from.

The landlady did not know, and little miss was backward with her tongue, as delicate children often were. They only had a nurse with them, she said, and she looked at the spade with just a little touch of curiosity.

"Dear me!" said the lady. "I should like to see that nurse again; but, unfortunately, we go away this evening. Perhaps these are Mr. Richard de Berenger's children, and their parents may be coming."

"I think not, ma'am," replied the landlady. "I have not heard of it."

Thereupon, having kissed the children, this lady departed, and the landlady said to her daughter, "Well, 'Ria, my girl, only think how I have wished to ask Mrs. Snaith who the children were, and didn't seem to think she would like it, she being so close, and yet all the time here was their name as plain as print for anybody that liked to look at it!"

"You didn't know their name, mother?" cried the girl.

"No; I say I didn't. Did you?"

"Well, I don't know as I gave it a thought that she hadn't mentioned it, till one night (last week I think it was) I noticed it on some pinafores that she sent to the wash."

"It just shows what fancies folks take in their heads," observed the landlady. "I felt as sure as could be she didn't want

to tell who they were, and so I never asked her; and now look!" She held up the spade and laughed.

"They might be that parson's children," said the girl; "him that was here three summers ago, mother, in our house, with his boy brother and his aunt."

"Hardly," answered the mother; "he was not a married man then, I know."

"My!" cried the girl, "how those two used to tease that aunt, the lady that would always be talking of her will. I was so little then, they used to go on while I was waiting, and not mind me. Well, to be sure, what a silly old thing she was!"

"And you were always as handy as could be. To see you wait, so little as you were, has made many a lodger laugh," observed the mother, with pleasant pride in her offspring.

Here the conversation ended, Mrs. Snaith never hearing of the questions that

had been asked concerning the children, nor of the reminiscences of 'Ria and her mother. The half of either, if duly reported, would have changed her plans entirely, and changed her children's destiny and her own.

Mrs. Snaith quickly found that she was living very much beyond her income, so she very soon went away from that little seaside place; but her delicate children had improved during their stay so much, that she proposed to come back again when the season was quite over, and rooms might be had for an almost nominal rent, to give them again the benefit of the fine air.

She thus betrayed to the landlady her expectation that these children would be some time under her sole charge and control. The good woman was all the more deferential to her in consequence, and finding her more reticent day by day, took care to let her depart without asking her a single question.

Mrs. Snaith thought what a nice hard-working woman she was—one who minded her own business, and had no idle curiosity in her—and she was perhaps beguiled by this opinion into the only piece of confidence she offered, namely, that she had brought these children from London.

She established herself about twelve miles inland, in a small village, where she found a decent little cottage to let. She wanted to save money, that she might send her darlings, when they were old enough, to a good school; but, meanwhile, she dressed them well and waited on them with the devoted love of a mother, combined with her assumed position of nurse.

It was enough to satisfy and make happy and cheerful a mind constituted as hers. She grew stout, looked well and serene, and month by month her darlings became fresher and fatter; only little Delia, as she fancied, sometimes limped a little on her

right foot, and this made her anxious, considering the child's parentage.

There were no mothers in the village whom she could consult, excepting the wives of two small farmers, and they both recommended that little miss should be taken to the shore to paddle in the salt water. They were sure that was what the father would approve.

It had come to be thought there—a thought which had grown out of the remarks of the villagers one to another—that the children's father was abroad: that they had lost their mother seemed to be evident.

Mrs. Snaith—her security in that obscure place having been so complete—did not think of stepping forth again into the inquisitive world without a pang. She had taken up her new name and position in a far more confident spirit than she now felt in carrying them on. Month by month she became more afraid of ultimate detection, not so

much by the wretched father, as by the children themselves.

She had lived in her tiny cottage two years, and their infantile intelligence was equal already to the perception (a false one, but not the less tenaciously held) that there was a difference of rank between them and their dear nurse. They could by no means have expressed this, but every one about them helped it to unconscious growth.

Amabel was six years old. In her sweet humility the mother considered herself not equal to teaching even so much as the alphabet to a child destined to be herself a teacher.

She had tried hard to divest herself of her provincial expressions, some of which her dear lady had pointed out to her. In many cases she had succeeded, but her grammar was faulty, and certain peculiarities of language clung yet to her daily English. She wanted little Amabel to

speak well from the first, and she went to a poor but well-educated old lady—the late clergyman's sister, who boarded in a farmhouse near her cottage—and proposed to her to teach the child for two or three hours a day. Miss Price said she should be delighted to teach little Miss de Berenger, and she instilled into her mind, while so doing, various notions not out of place considering the position she supposed her to hold. She must remember that she was a young lady. She must never talk in a sing-song tone, as her good nurse did; that was provincial. Her dear papa would be much vexed if she used such and such expressions. No doubt she often thought about her dear papa, and wished that he should be pleased with her on his return.

Little Amabel was a docile child: she did begin to wish to please this dear papa. In her infantile fashion she felt a strange attraction toward him, and set him in her

mind far above the tender woman whose care and pride she was, while, like most other children who have a governess and a nurse, she gave her kisses to the nurse, and talked like the governess.

But little Delia, in case her ankle was really weak, must have every advantage, whatever happened. So Mrs. Snaith wrote to her former landlady, asking the price of rooms, and was told that if she could come at a particular time mentioned, between two other "lets," she should have some cheap. She felt, when she appeared at the door with the children, that she had not gained courage, though she had been on the whole very happy; she knew the day must come when she would be confronted by awkward questions. She had often rehearsed in her mind the words she would use in reply. They were to be very few and simple, and long reflection had made her aware that her danger of

self-betrayal would lie most in the way she met matters that were taken for granted.

The landlady thought her more "close" than ever. "I did not expect to see your little ladies so much grown and so rosy," she remarked. "I thought, ma'am, you said Miss Delia was not well."

"It was only that I thought her ankle was weak," said Mrs. Snaith, anxiously. "I fared to think she turned one of her feet in more than the other when she walked."

This conversation took place while the landlady cleared away breakfast the day after Mrs. Snaith's arrival. "Many children do that," quoth the good woman, impelled, spite of her own interest, to make a suggestive observation. "Why, dear me, ma'am, their father will be a strange gentleman if he is not satisfied, when he returns, that you have done the best anybody could for them."

She was rewarded for once. Mrs. Snaith coloured all over her honest, homely face ; concealment did not come easily to her. She answered that she had no reason at all to think he would not be satisfied, and her reply, considering the character of this said father, seemed to herself almost ridiculous ; she knew well that he cared for their welfare not a straw. And the landlady, not having been contradicted, supposed herself to know that the children's father was abroad.

Mrs. Snaith fell easily into her old habit of sitting at work on the beach while she watched the children playing at the edge of the wave. They were very much grown. Both were lovely, and in all respects unlike herself. She instinctively kept apart from the other nurses and children. Her quiet life went on in a great silence, yet she was happy ; love and service contented her. She was safe for a long while to come from

the husband whose drunken brawls had made life a misery, and whose crimes had kept her in constant fear. She was freed from want, and that alone was enough to make her wake every morning in a conscious state of thankfulness.

The fortnight she had meant to stay at the seaside had almost come to an end, and she was watching Delia one afternoon, and feeling almost contented with her pretty little white ankles—that slight something, whatever it had been, habit or weakness, had almost disappeared, and, lovely and rosy, the little creature was paddling in the water with her sister—when clear through the still air rang a voice that she recognized, as its owner came up briskly to her side.

“Why, there’s that nurse again, the person that I told you of! And the children with her. There they all are, I declare !”

Mrs. Snaith turned slowly, and saw the lady who had asked the children's name two years ago. She had never forgotten her, nor that her landlady had called her Miss Thimbleby. They hurried up.

“ You have forgotten me, perhaps ? ”

“ No, ma'am.”

They sat down near her. “ I saw the children's name on their spades,” said Miss Thimbleby. “ This”—pointing out the other lady with an air as if she was giving some intelligence that must be most welcome—“ this is Miss de Berenger.”

“ Indeed, ma'am,” said Mrs. Snaith, with slow and quiet caution ; and she lifted attentive eyes to the stranger, who nodded and smiled.

“ Yes, I am Miss de Berenger. You have heard him speak of me, no doubt ? ”

“ Him ? ”

“ He was always my favourite,” continued the lady, who seemed both glad

and excited, “ and of course he must have mentioned me. Indeed, I am sure of it.”

This was rather a startling speech.

“ I don’t understand you, ma’am,” said Mrs. Snaith, slowly. She looked again at Miss de Berenger. It did not require much penetration to see that she was not a wise woman ; her style of dress alone might have suggested this thought, if there had been nothing else about her to do it.

“ And I have looked for you repeatedly, and told my nephew Felix all about you ; but we never could find you, either of us.”

“ Looked for us ! Indeed, ma’am, may I ask why ? ”

“ Why? why? ” exclaimed Miss Thimbleby, with reproachful astonishment. “ Do I really hear you asking why? ”

A little useful resentment here rising in Mrs. Snaith’s breast enabled her to answer rather sharply, “ Yes, you do.” And she looked again at the lady who had been mentioned as Miss de Berenger.

She was a slender, upright little woman of between fifty and sixty, nearer to the latter age. Her hair, not precisely red, was yet too near that colour to pass for golden. It was abundant for her time of life, free from grey, and dressed in long loose curls, so light and “fluffy,” that they blew about with the slightest movement in the air. Her dress was of that reddish purple which makes orange look more conspicuous. She had a green parasol, wore a good deal of jewelry, had a jaunty air, and might have passed for little more than forty—so brisk and youthful was she—but that her cheeks were streaked with the peculiar red of an apple that has been kept into the winter—a bright, fixed hue, which early in life is scarcely ever seen.

The other lady was very plainly dressed, and seemed to be under thirty. She started up on hearing Mrs. Snaith’s last word, and going to the edge of the wave, brought back

with her the two children, who, a little surprised by Miss de Berenger's gay appearance, stood gazing at her for a moment, their shining bare feet gleaming white on the sand, and their rosy mouths pouting with just the least little impatience at being taken away from the water.

“The very image of him!” exclaimed Miss de Berenger, shaking back her curls and clasping her hands. “Come and kiss me, my pretty ones.”

The children, with infantile indifference, gave the required kisses, looked at the lady, looked at Mrs. Snaith; but the one was drying her eyes, the other watchful, to discover what this might mean. She turned cold, but did not look at her darlings, so they took the opportunity to slip away and run back to the water.

“Where is their father now?” asked Miss de Berenger. “Ah, I was very fond of him. If he had only stopped at home, I should

have left him everything.” A twinkling in her eyes seemed to promise tears. She wiped them again, though these proofs of feeling had not come. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” said Mrs. Snaith, who now laid down her work, to hide the trembling of her hands.

“He is abroad, of course?”

“Ma’am, I am not sure.”

Both answers perfectly true.

The reluctance to speak was evident; it seemed to astonish Miss de Berenger, even to the point of making her silent.

“Why, surely,” exclaimed the other lady, with a certain air of severity, as if by the weight of her disapproval she hoped to oppress Mrs. Snaith into giving her testimony—“surely you can have no objection to answer a few questions—such natural questions as these, nurse!”

“Perhaps she has had her orders,” murmured Miss de Berenger.

Mrs. Snaith for the moment was much surprised at this question. Under whose orders could they think she was ?

“ Unless that is the case,” said Miss Thimbleby, with uncivil directness, “ I cannot understand what reason you can have for concealing anything from Miss de Berenger—what *good* reason.”

Again indignation came to the aid of Mrs. Snaith. She rose on hearing this, took up the children’s shoes and socks, and turning her back on the two ladies, went down to the water’s edge, and called her little barefooted treasures to come to her.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. SNAITH had no sooner got away from the two ladies, than she began to wonder why she had been so much alarmed. She had hardly understood at first that Miss de Berenger claimed the children as relations. “And why,” she thought, “should this have frightened me? I have no presence of mind at all. I should have told her she was mistaken, and there would have been an end. Folks cannot take them from me; and if I make it seem to everybody that I am their nurse, and allow that their father is living, it’s natural—I fare to see now—that people should think I must be under his orders.”

She turned while seated on the sand, fitting on little boots. Miss de Berenger was behind her.

“We did not mean to offend you,” she exclaimed, shaking back her curls. “I am sure, nurse, you are doing your duty by the darlings, but——”

“I am not offended with *you*, ma’am,” answered Mrs. Snaith, when she stopped short. “Anybody can see that you are quite the lady, and had no thought of being rude.”

“Then I wish you would be a little more open, nurse. You say you do not know where their father is, but you might at least tell me how long it is since you heard from him.”

Mrs. Snaith pondered, then gave the truth. “Two years and three months, ma’am. But will you sit down a minute? Run on, my pretty ones.”

The children, nothing loth, obeyed. Miss de Berenger sat down.

“ Ma’am, you make it plain that you think these children must be related to you.”

“ Of course ; I am sure of it.”

“ Well, ma’am, then it is my duty to tell you that they are not. You don’t owe them any kindness, I do assure you. They are not related to you at all.”

“ Not that you know of,” said Miss de Berenger, in correction. “ But,” she continued, “ there might be family reasons, you must allow—very important family reasons—for not telling you everything about them.”

She was perfectly polite in her manner, but this pertinacity alarmed Mrs. Snaith again. What should she say next ? She had not decided, when Miss de Berenger went on—

“ Did he tell you to bring them here ? Because, if he did, it must have been on purpose that I or some of us might find them out, and acknowledge them.”

Here was at least a suggestion which could be met and denied.

“Nobody told me to bring them here, ma’am. I do assure you I did it wholly to please myself, and out of my own head.”

“Well, well, Felix must be told of this,” said Miss de Berenger, not at all convinced. She twisted one of her curls over rather a bony finger. “I shall consult Felix, and he will soon get to the root of the matter.”

“I don’t think Felix will,” thought Mrs. Snaith, and a furtive smile, in spite of herself, gleamed in her eyes.

“But, surely,” continued the good lady, “you can have no motive for being more reticent with me than with the person in whose lodgings you are. She knows that you brought the children first from London, that their father is away, and that they have lost their mother, for she told us so.”

“Did she, ma’am?” said Mrs. Snaith; and pondering the matter in her mind,

she felt sure she had never said they had lost their mother.

“ You are entrusted with the entire charge of them,” was the next question ; “ is it not so ? ”

“ Yes ; they have no one to look after them but me.”

“ They are very like the family, and so my friend remarked, when she saw them here some time ago.”

“ Do you mean that person who was with you just now ? ” quoth Mrs. Snaith. She was still offended with her.

“ She is quite a lady,” exclaimed Miss de Berenger instantly, losing sight of the matter in hand to defend this person. “ It is true that she has married Mr. de Berenger’s fellow-curate, which was a most imprudent thing to do (and everybody said so), particularly as he had been plucked at college till he had hardly a feather left on him ; but she would have him, and they

were married, and had twin children with lightning rapidity. She is come here with me to get cured, if possible, of a bad cough that she has had ever since some months before their birth. But, indeed, what could she expect, going out as she did when the roads were blocked up with snow, and the thermometer yards below zero ? ”

The lady in question now made herself audible, as she came pounding down through the shingle to join them. It was evident to her keen observation that no fresh information had been obtained.

Mrs. Snaith rose, and, preparing to follow the children, made a bow to Miss de Berenger ; whereupon the mother of twins said coldly—

“ Miss de Berenger is very much hurt, and very much surprised too—that I can plainly see—by the way in which you have repelled her kind advances. The children’s true interests are evidently very far from

your thoughts. You can only think of your own."

"Good afternoon, ladies," said the nurse, tossing her head rather haughtily; and she passed on, half frightened again. There was a self-satisfied air of authority in the speaker, and something threatening in her tone, which, under the circumstances, was very ridiculous, and yet a certain effect was produced on her who knew those circumstances best.

Not even a mother could seriously believe that any one wanted to steal her children. Mrs. Snaith did not reach that point of folly; but she felt uneasy and insecure, as if, having ceased to admit her maternity, she had lost power over them.

Her boxes were already packed, she having previously intended going away by that evening's train; and she was truly glad that the little chaise was at the door and the two children in it, when, Miss de

Berenger coming up with her friend, she noticed the puzzled look of the one and the displeasure of the other.

She had bid her landlady good-bye, and had directed her driver to the station, when the voice of the late Miss Thimbleby struck on her ear. “Why, the woman’s actually running away!”

“Drive on,” said Mrs. Snaith.

“Running away, ma’am!” cried the landlady, looking after the chaise as it bore off her late lodgers. “Quite the contrary, I do assure you. Mrs. Snaith would have been very thankful to stay, if I could have kept her. As it is, I’ve let her stop on till I’m very hard drove to clean up for my next ‘let.’ Nobody ever ‘runs away’ from this place; and goodness knows there’s little need, so healthy and bracing as it is.”

Miss de Berenger hastened to say something complimentary concerning the place,

and, in return, the landlady obliged her with the address of her late lodger.

About ten days after this, while Mrs. Snaith, already calmed by a sense of remoteness from observation, was pleasing herself with the certainty that her little Delia walked now as well as other children, Miss de Berenger took an opportunity to open her mind to her nephew, and fill him with a vague sense of responsibility towards these children.

Felix de Berenger was seven and twenty, a bachelor. He had lately been presented to a living, a very small one in point of income, but having a good-sized and comfortable house attached to it, a most excellent garden, two fields, an orchard, and a poultry yard.

To this place he had thankfully removed what little furniture he possessed, together with his books and his two brothers; also the nurse who had brought up the younger

of these, and now, with a village girl to help her, did all the work of the parsonage, including the care of a cow and a pig.

His circumstances were peculiar. While he was yet almost in infancy, his father's regiment had been ordered to India, and he had been left behind. Several children, born to his parents during the next few years, had died in early childhood, and they had returned to England for the year's leave with one only, a boy just eight years younger than Felix.

The mother made great lamentation over the loss of her children, from the hot climate not suiting them. She left the second son behind also, and returning to India with her husband, the same misfortune overtook her again—her infants died; and it was not till after her final return to her native country that the youngest of her surviving children was born. He was now between seven and eight years old—a deli-

cate little fellow, childlike in appearance, fully nineteen years younger than his eldest brother, and, being already orphaned, wholly dependent on the said brother both for maintenance and affection.

Miss de Berenger, a woman of good fortune, had come to stay with her dear nephew Felix, and, in her own opinion, to help him. She loved to scheme for other people, but out of her ample means she afforded them nothing but schemes.

Yet she was not accounted mean, for she was perfectly consistent. If people render help to those near to them at intervals, which are felt to be remote, or if their frequent presents are considered to be inadequate, they are thought ungenerous; but if they never give anything at all, they often escape from such an imputation. The minds of others are at rest concerning them, the looking out for needed assistance not being connected with them.

The late Mrs. de Berenger had considered her husband's only brother to be extremely mean; and this was mainly because once, when her little Dick was a baby, he had caused his wife, with profuse expressions of good will from him, to bring the child a handsome little merino coat.

Miss de Berenger, having come to stay with her dear nephew Felix, was waiting in his pleasant dining-room till he should appear to breakfast.

He had been away from home when she arrived; sitting up with a sick parishioner, whose bedside he had not left till late in the night. She had not, therefore, seen him, and was now occupied in looking about her.

There were only six chairs in the room; these were of a very light description. "Four and sixpence each, I should think," she reflected; "certainly, not more." Then there were two large, solid bookcases,

which were so disposed as to make the most of themselves. A square of carpet was spread in the middle of the room, and on this stood the table; all uncovered parts of the floor being stained brown. This scanty furnishing made the large room look larger. It looked, also, rather empty—for it was rather empty.

She walked to one of the windows, and, gazing out, saw what pleased her better. On the right, but a good way off, was a very high and thick yew-tree hedge, with a square place in front of it paved with small coggle-stones. In this grew two fine walnut trees. Nearer to her, and only divided from the paved yard by a line of artificial rock-work scarcely a foot high, was a large, beautiful garden, which, close to the house, was planted with rose-bushes, lilies, tree-peonies, and many lovely old-fashioned plants, called by modern gardeners “herbaceous rubbish.” Those pernicious

weeds, the scarlet geranium and the yellow calceolaria, had not found their way into it. As this garden sloped away from the house, large fruit trees of fine growth appeared among the flower borders; climbing clematis, white or purple, was folded round the trunks of some. Further off still, but not divided by any hedge from the flowers, excellent crops of various vegetables might be seen.

A second window in the dining-room showed her a mossy old lawn, in which grew two immense fir trees, and between them was visible the broad, low tower of a village church.

Felix came down, his young brother Amias followed; a few words of welcome were said, then the bell was rung for prayers, and in came the two servants, the little brother Dick, and Miss de Beringer's maid.

If Felix had not been thinking of his

sick parishioner, he must have noticed the restlessness of his aunt. As it was, he proceeded, after prayers, to help her to her breakfast, with nothing to break the force of his surprise, when, after little Dick had shut the door behind him, she flung back her curls and exclaimed, with an air of triumph—

“Yes! Well, now, Felix; well, now, Amias, what do you think? I’ve discovered the most astonishing family mystery that you ever heard of. It’s enough to make your hair stand on end.”

They were both well used to their aunt’s sensational speeches: to do her justice, it was their habit of insisting on not being astonished at what she had to say, which mainly led to her constantly making her statements more and more startling.

Amias continued to cut the bread quite calmly, but Felix paused with his fork in the bacon. His aunt’s bright-red cheeks had

taken a clearer dye than usual ; she was evidently excited herself, not merely trying to excite them.

“I told you,” she exclaimed, tossing back her curls to cool her face—“I told you I believed I was on the track of John’s children. Poor John ! Yes, I’ve found them, Felix. And their nurse, being alarmed at something (what, I don’t know), positively stood me out, and declared that they were no relations of ours. Poor little waifs, they are the very image of him ; and unless we show a parent’s heart towards them, Felix, I really do not know what is to become of them.”

Felix, unequal to the task of cutting the bacon, left the fork sticking upright in it.

“John’s children !” he exclaimed. “Why, John’s not married ; at least, I never had a hint that he was, much less that he had a family.”

“Nor had I, Felix ; but I always sus-

pected that, when he quarrelled with his father and went away, he *did* marry that young person. And I have no doubt, whatever the nurse may say, that he sent her to D—— on purpose that I might fall in with the children. Her conduct was most peculiar; she no sooner found out that they were relations of mine, than she rushed off with them. But she had better mind what she is about. I am going to write to her, for I have her address, and I shall tell her that if I go to law with her, it will certainly be brought in ‘abduction of an heiress.’ ”

“ An heiress ! ” exclaimed Felix. “ She cannot be John’s child, then.”

“ She is a very lovely little girl; and if I make a will in her favour, she will turn out to be an heiress. And then, as I said, that nurse had better look out, or she will get herself transported for carrying her off as she has done.”

At this point the two brothers seemed to lose their interest in the matter, and to find their wonder subside, so that they could begin to eat their breakfast.

She then gave an account of what had passed, but at the same time taking so much for granted, and so piecing together what she had been told, what she thought, and what the landlady had thought, that Felix, in spite of himself, could not help believing that these children must be John de Berenger's daughters.

John de Berenger was the third son of old Sir Samuel de Berenger, who, having married late in life, was the father of a family very little older than Felix de Berenger, the son of his nephew.

The baronet's eldest son, for whom he had never cared much, was a confirmed invalid, spending most of his time at Algiers or in Italy. He was a married man, but childless. The second son, Tom, had just married, and

gone to join his regiment in India. The third, John, who was not without certain endearing qualities, was no credit to any one belonging to him. He was reckless of opinion, extravagant, and so hopelessly in debt, that he would certainly have been outlawed, but that there was only one healthy life between him and the baronetcy; and his father, moreover, was both rich and old. So that it seemed to his creditors wise to wait on the chance of his inheriting, at least, enough to pay his debts, provided they did not make his father aware how great these were.

“I cannot bear to hear poor John called the reprobate of the family,” exclaimed Miss de Berenger, “and threatened with outlawry, dear fellow!”

It was partly on account of the word “outlaw” that Miss de Berenger took a romantic interest in John. No halo hangs about vulgar debt, but outlawry brings to

mind the Lincoln green, bows and arrows, and a silver horn to blow upon under the greenwood tree.

“I wish you would not tease the *old man* about these children,” said Amias. “Hasn’t he enough to think of just now? I’m the reprobate of the family. I repudiate John; he’s an impostor.”

“Yes, indeed, Amias,” cried Miss de Berenger instantly, remembering that she ought to bear her testimony against the youth’s behaviour. “Yes, very sad. I’ve heard of your conduct. Sir Sam wrote to me in a rage. I hear you’ve turned teetotaler as well, on purpose to insult him; and I’m informed that you said brewing was not a proper trade for a gentleman.”

“I said drunkenness was the cause of almost all the misery in the country. I said there was hardly a judge on the bench who had not declared that it had to do with nine-tenths of the crime that came before him. I said——”

“Now, look here,” exclaimed Felix, suddenly rousing up, “I can stand a good deal, but I can’t and won’t stand a temperance lecture on the top of John’s children!” Then thinking, perhaps, that he had been a little too vehement, he added and half laughed, “It’s all right, my boy.”

“The *old man* has a great deal to worry him just now,” said Amias, excusing his brother’s sudden heat to his aunt.

“And after he had been so kind—I mean, Sir Sam had been so kind—and proposed to take you into the concern, and in time give you an interest in it! Yes, it is very sad.”

“Well, you would not have had me be such a sneak, I suppose, as not to tell Uncle Sam what I’d done? Everybody else knew. I’d been bursting with rage some time to think how we were actually the ruin of people. But that was not why I did it, I can tell you; I did it for fun.

When that temperance fellow came into the village, and stood on a kitchen chair ranting, a lot of people soon got round him, and some of them cheered and some jeered me as I came calmly by and stopped to listen."

"Ah! stopped to listen, Amias. That shows what comes of tampering with evil. Well?"

"Well, presently two drunken men came reeling up, and insisted on shaking hands with me. And the people hauled out another chair from a cottage, and declared that I must mount it and answer him. I had not known at first what it was that he was ranting about, with 'dear brethren,' and 'dear sisters,' and 'dear fellow-sinners.' By the time I did know they would not let me off; they stamped and cheered, and said it was election time, and I must and should speak up for the old concern."

"Well, Amias, well."

“Why, the tide turned against the temperance man ; they hooted him down. And (I was excited at first, you know, it seemed such fun) so I got on the chair and imitated the man, his cockney talk and cant. I did him capitally ; I ranted till they all shrieked with laughter. And then I stopped, for I knew I was doing the devil’s work. I stopped, I tell you, and I told them the temperance man was quite right, and asked them if they didn’t know it, and all that ; and then, Felix coming up, I felt that I was stumped, and I jumped down and ran off. I could hear every step I took on the grass, the people were so still ; I suppose it was with astonishment.”

“Very sad,” said Miss de Berenger again. Felix smiled.

“So,” continued the boy, “I thought the next day I had better go and tell it all to Uncle Sam. The *old man* thought so too ; so I went and did for myself, for,

of course, he sent me packing. And here I am."

"Well," said Miss de Berenger, with some bitterness, and what was meant for irony, "then, I hope the *old man* made you welcome."

"Yes," said Felix, calmly, "I did."

"You needn't shake your head, aunt," proceeded the boy. "I'm glad I did it."

Miss de Berenger had sense enough to see that what she might say on this subject could have no effect. She returned to her former theme; she did not see how poor John's children were to be educated.

"The proper person to tell this to is old Sam himself," observed Felix.

"Oh, I have written to him, my dear Felix. I have laid the whole matter before him, and——"

"And what?"

"And he repudiates them utterly! But

if he could see them, beautiful little creatures, and such a respectable nurse, I'm sure it would soften his heart."

"How can John afford a nurse? His father allows him very little to live on."

"Very little. I thought it so touching to see them handsomely dressed when John must be almost in want. It shows his heart is in the right place. And then, no doubt, he had them thrown in our way, hoping we should take them up."

"If that is the case, why, in the name of common sense, did their nurse carry them off?"

"Why, my dear, she might not know his motive, or she was afraid, perhaps, that my penetration, or some unexpected question of mine, might lead her to betray what she is probably aware must not be told—that is, where John's abode is."

"It sounds queer," said Felix.

Miss de Berenger took no notice of this

remark, but dashed into what seemed a perfectly different subject.

“And what about poor little Dick? He has had no lessons at all since you came here. Yes, he ought to have a governess, for he is far too delicate to go to school.”

“Aunt, you know very well that I cannot afford a governess just yet.”

“But, Felix, I have matured a scheme. Yes, I have thought it out. I wish I was more thankful for this talent committed to me of planning for others. You know dear Cecilia’s sister, Ann Thimbleby, of course?”

“Of course,” said Felix, without any enthusiasm.

“Dear Cecilia would like so much to have her near at hand. But then, you know, Ann has to educate her little sister, and she finds it extremely difficult to meet with any one who will take a governess and a ten-years’-old sister with her.”

“I should think so!”

“ Ann Thimbleby asks forty pounds a year salary.”

“ Oh.”

“ Felix, do listen.”

“ Ann Thimbleby asks forty pounds a year salary, you said.”

“ Yes, Felix ; but she and the child are vegetarians. Just think of your garden. It would cost you a mere nothing to feed them, with the eggs, too, that you have from the poultry yard, and the milk from your cow. You would still (when your family was supplied) have fruit and vegetables to exchange for groceries, as I explained to you was commonly done. If you would give her little sister board and lodging, and let Ann teach her with Dick, Ann would take ten pounds a year and be thankful. I know she would, for she has twenty pounds a year of her own.”

“ I could not afford even that. I should still be out of pocket.”

“Yes, you would—perhaps almost as much as twenty pounds a year. Yes. But, then, there are these little De Berengers. I have ascertained that their nurse pays a certain Miss Price twenty pounds for teaching them. Now, Felix, if that woman would come and live in the village, you could agree with Anne to teach the four children together, and you, receiving the twenty pounds, would get Dick educated for nothing. You would keep a kind of co-operative store for the benefit of all parties, the goods being children.”

Felix was struck with surprise.

“You actually propose to me to encumber myself with a governess, a girl, and two children, in order to get little Dick taught his lessons ? ”

“Well, Felix, can you think of a better plan ? It would be bringing these darlings close to their own family, and getting Dick looked after and taught for nothing. I do

not mean to say that Mary Thimbleby is a nice child—far be it from me to deceive you. She is a stupid, uncomfortable girl, and how their mother, who was the sweetest woman—so managing, too—contrived to have such an uncomfortable child, I cannot think. It is something quite new in that family to produce a variety of the sort. But these subjects,” continued Miss de Berenger, pushing back her loose curls, and putting on an air of wisdom and cogitation —“these subjects are as intricate as all others on the origin of species.”

A gleam of joy shot across the dark face of Felix, but he remained silent, and his aunt continued.

“And as for Cecilia’s marrying Carlos Tanner, of course that was very imprudent ; but I cannot help taking an interest in him, considering, my dears, that I ought to have been his mother, and that, but for the fickleness of mankind, I should have been.”

This was an old story.

“Never mind, Aunt Sarah,” said Amias. “His father’s wife lost all her fortune after he married her, and everybody said that served him right.”

“And she had been a widow twice before he took her,” observed Felix.

“Yes,” said Aunt Sarah, much consoled; “and she was married in a brown gown—actually, my dears, in a brown gown. If he had married me, I should have had a white one.”

“Well, then, I hope the wedding cake, instead of white, was done with brown sugar,” continued Felix.

“For consistency’s sake it should have been,” answered Sarah; “but, my dears, we cannot expect consistency in this world ! Yes !”

CHAPTER VIII.

THIS plan of Miss de Berenger's appeared to her nephew so preposterous, that he gave it no better reception than a somewhat ironical smile ; then he finished his breakfast, and what more his aunt had to say he heard without receiving the sense. Yet, in less than one month, he was glad to carry out the whole scheme, almost to the letter.

In about a week he found that he was living precisely up to his income, and had nothing to spare for such contingencies as illness, nor anything to spend on Dick's education. At the same time, Miss de Berenger having said vaguely that no doubt little Dick would soon have a gover-

ness, a widow lady, a friend of hers, who lived half a mile off, came and proposed advantageous terms, if her son might come as a day pupil, and take his lessons with Dick. Her boy, she said, was lonely; he was delicate; he was her only child. Might he ride over on his pony? She was sure they should agree about terms.

On this hint Miss de Berenger spoke again, and got leave from Felix to write to Mrs. Snaith; which she did, proposing to the poor woman to come and live in a little cottage then vacant, and pay twenty pounds a year for the education of the two children.

Mrs. Snaith did not often laugh, but she laughed heartily when she got that letter; felt as if she had been politely invited to step into the lion's den, and put it aside, taking nearly a fortnight for considering the precise terms in which she could decline it.

But lo, at the end of that term scarlet fever broke out in the farmhouse where Miss Price the governess lived, and she felt at once a longing desire to get away from the place. She only took her little cottage by the week; she could hire a cart to carry away her furniture to the station. She had spent a good deal of money on her late trip to the seaside, and could not possibly afford another. How cheap this plan was—how easy! And, after all, no one but herself had any power over the children; no one could possibly prevent her taking them away again from these De Berengers whenever she chose.

She drew out the letter again. There was no time to be lost; one more day brought her news of another case of fever, and without loss of an hour she wrote a respectful letter to Miss de Berenger, setting forth that she would appear with the children the very next evening, and what

little furniture she had should come with them.

Miss de Berenger had seldom been happier. She rushed to accept the widow's proposition, then she flew to arrange matters with Miss Thimbleby, which she did in such a satisfactory fashion, that this young lady was to receive a small salary for her services, together with vegetarian board, lodging, and leave to educate the little sister; Felix, on his part, taking the remainder of what Mrs. Snaith and the widow lady were to pay, so as to reimburse himself for his outlay, and pay also for the small quantity of cheap furniture that had to be bought, his main advantage being that he was to get his little brother taught and looked after for nothing.

It was an anxious and trying day for Mrs. Snaith that took her, her children, and her goods, to the new home. Several times during the course of it imagination

transported her among the people she was going to. How would they receive her? What questions would they ask? She thought of them as excited also, as busy about her affairs, for Miss de Berenger had assured her that the little cottage should be swept down for her, and that she should find a comfortable supper ready there for herself and her little charge.

There was a certain amount of bustle, and some excitement also, that day at the parsonage ; not in the minds of Felix or his brother, for they were gone out for the day ; and not concerning Mrs. Snaith. If she could have known what it was that effaced her from their thoughts, it would have helped her, as such things always do, to realize how small the place was that she filled in creation.

It is hard sometimes, when one had thought that one's self and one's affairs were filling the minds of others, to find

that one has been utterly forgotten; but it is positively humbling to discover, as is sometimes our lot, what a small, what an utterly worthless thing it was that blotted us out.

However, in this case, it cannot be said to have been a small thing—quite the contrary. It was a very large thing; there was the oddness of the matter. And how so large a thing could possibly be lost, missing, or mislaid, in such a scantily furnished house, was the whole mystery. The thing, in short, for sake of which Mrs. Snaith passed out of mind, was a clothes-basket.

Jolliffe, the servant, had looked all over for it, and was out of breath. A girl who had been blamed, and had wept in consequence, was now helping the others to express the common astonishment, and counting off on her fingers, as Jolliffe enumerated them, all the places, likely and unlikely, that had been looked into in vain.

A large bundle of clothes, ready tied up to be put into this basket, was lying in the mean time on the clean kitchen floor, and the washerwoman sat in judgment upon it, deciding that it was too heavy to be carried as it was, even with the help of her little boy, who, with his legs hanging down, sat regarding it with a sheepish and shamefaced air, as one so used to be accused, when any sort of mischief had been perpetrated, that he was expecting every moment to hear the loss of the basket confidently laid at his door.

Just then a youth, who had been hired to weed, came clattering across the paved yard in his hobnailed boots.

“I forgot the loft,” said Jolliffe; and she put her head out at the casement window. “Andrew, you go and look in the loft over the stable if the big clothes-basket is there.”

“I know it can’t be there, mem,” answered the boy.

“I didn’t ask you what you knew,” said Mrs. Jolliffe, with the dignity of full conviction. “If it’s not in a likely place, it stands to reason that it must be in an unlikely. You go and do as I bid you.”

“Yes, mem,” said the boy; and he burst into a chuckling laugh, and instantly was grave again.

“That boy Andrew is the awkwardest in the parish,” continued Mrs. Jolliffe; “but when I say the basket couldn’t have gone without hands, I don’t mean but what his hands are clean, in a manner of speaking.”

“It ain’t there,” said Andrew, returning, and chuckling again. Whereupon he was reproved by all parties for things in general, including his having been frequently seen to laugh even at his work, as if nothing was of any account; which, they observed, had very probably emboldened some tramp to carry off the missing article. He was then made to fetch the lightest wheelbarrow

from the potato garden, and in that the clothes for the wash were solemnly wheeled away.

The soft shadows of evening were coming on, and everything about the parsonage was very still, when Miss de Berenger came bustling up to the kitchen door, calling for Dick.

“I cannot find him anywhere, Jolliffe. I want him to come this minute, and see his little cousins. They have just arrived at the cottage with their nurse, and I told them they should see him.”

Jolliffe had been leaning out at the dairy window, talking to a market gardener, who also kept a shop in the neighbouring town, in which he sold both fruit and grocery, and with whom Felix, under Miss de Berenger’s advice, had made an agreement to exchange some of his superfluous fruit for tea and other groceries. She now started forth, suddenly remembering that she had

not seen Dick for a long time, the gardener following.

“Wherever can the dear child be!” she exclaimed. “I should have looked after him before, if I hadn’t had those lettuces on my mind. They’ve all come to their hearts at once; the dairy floor is all over green things that master cut for fear their heads should spread.”

“That comes of the vegetable ladies,” observed the gardener. “I’m sure I don’t grudge anything its growth,—not but what I shall lose by all those apricots being ripe together.”

“Wherever can the dear child be!” repeated Jolliffe. “Master Dick!” she shouted, “where are you? Come, it’s supper time, and your aunt wants you, lovey.”

A childish whoop answered, and was echoed from the old church tower, which was close to the garden.

“I can’t tell where he is,” she observed ; “the sound seemed to come from all round.” Then she turned to the east, and exclaimed, “Why, goodness !—why, good gracious me, if ever I saw anything so strange in my life, Mr. Bolton ! There’s ever so many stars shining in the chestnut tree.”

Mr. Bolton looked. There stood the great horse-chestnut tree, in all the splendour of its rich, deep foliage, and there certainly was a light shining between the leaves. Not the moon, for she hung a yellow crescent, that yielded no light at all ; not Venus, for she, of all stars, was the only one out ; but a warm orange, steady light that illuminated the whole centre of the tree, and shone through the leaves as well as between them.

The soft veil of the gloaming came on, and made this light every moment brighter ; while such a silence seemed to gather and rise from under the trees, that Jolliffe and

her companion, as they slowly and cautiously approached, did not care to speak. Then the woman hung back, the light looked so strange ; and the man went under, looked up, and came back with a smile.

“I’ll give you two guesses regarding what’s up in that tree !” he exclaimed.

“Can’t I see that it’s a light ?” cried Mrs. Jolliffe, with much impatience. “I don’t see, though you have bought the fruit off the very walls, that I’ve any call to pick out answers for your riddles in master’s own garden, at this time o’ night.”

“Of course it’s a light,” replied Mr. Bolton, “but what’s the light *in* ? Well, if you don’t like to come any nigher, in regard of it’s being so close to the old churchyard, I’ll tell you. It’s in the old clothes-basket.”

Jolliffe’s surprise made her good-tempered. Again she came under the tree, and looked up. “This must be one of the dear child’s antics,” she observed ; “but however in the

world did he get it up there? Must be fifteen feet high. What a horrid dangerous trick!"

"I don't see that," answered Mr. Bolton. "He can climb like a cat. What he's done is this: he's drawn it up, do you see, by that long dangle of clothes-line to the fork where those three branches spread out, and there, as he stood above, he's managed to land it pretty steady, and he's tied it with the rope in and out among the boughs, and then he's fetched the stable lantern."

"And that boy Andrew helped him, I'll be bound!" exclaimed Mrs. Jolliffe. "I shouldn't wonder if he's in it now. Master Dicky dear, you'll speak to your own Jolly, won't you?"

A good deal of creaking was now heard in the wicker-work of the basket, but there was no answer.

"Oh, well, Mr. Bolton," remarked Mrs. Jolliffe, in a high-raised voice, "it's a clear

case that he ain't here; I'd better go in and tell his brother that he's *lost*."

A good deal more creaking, and something like a chuckle, was now heard in the basket, and presently over the edge peered the face of a great owl, a favourite companion of the child's.

It was dusk now under the tree, and the creature's eyes glared in the light of the lantern. Mrs. Jolliffe, being startled, called him a beast; but he looked far more like the graven image of a cherub on a tomb, for nothing of him could be seen but his widespread wings and his face, while he looked down and appeared to think the visit of these two persons intrusive and unseasonable.

"Well, old goggle-eyes," quoth Mr. Bolton, "so you're there too, are you? If you know where your master is, which appears likely—for you're as cunning as many Christians, and full as ugly—you'd better tell

him that, as sure as fate, we're going to fetch his brother out if he doesn't come down."

"Ay, that we are," added Mrs. Jolliffe. "Why, it'll be dark presently, and how is he to get down in the dark?"

The round, rosy face of little Dick was now reared up beside the face of the owl. He looked like a cherub too, but with a difference.

Mr. Bolton shook his head, and said rather gruffly, "Now, what are we to think of this here behaviour? What with getting yourself lifted off your legs, a-ringing the church bells, and what with setting yourself fast in the chimney, climbing after jack-daws' nests, and what with sailing in the wash-tub, and what with getting yourself mixed up with the weights of the parish clock, you're a handful to your family, I do declare, and a caution to parties about to marry."

Instead of looking at all penitent, the little urchin only said, “But you won’t *tell*, Jolly dear—you won’t really tell?”

“Yes,” answered Mrs. Jolliffe, stolidly, “I shall tell; so now you know. And how anybody that’s only to eat lettuces and green meat generally is ever to conquer *you*! Of course I shall tell.”

“Well, then, just throw up the cord,” said the little fellow, “and I’ll be down in a minute.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if that boy Andrew has been helping you,” observed Mrs. Jolliffe. “If he has, it may be as much as his place is worth.”

It was never worth more than ninepence a day; but the discussion was just then cut short by the sound of voices. Felix and his brother came down the grass walk.

“What’s all this?” said Felix; but before Mrs. Jolliffe and Mr. Bolton had explained, he had taken in the whole matter, and what

was more, he evidently thought nothing of it.

Amias brought a fruit-ladder, Felix called the little fellow down from his wicker nest, and when he was upon it and conveniently near, gave him a not unfriendly slap on his chubby person. "You had better look out, you little monkey," he remarked, in a casual and general sort of way. Little Dick said he would, and Felix, mounting the ladder, looked into the basket: saw the owl and the lantern, and a quantity of mown grass, also two books of fairy tales which Dick had been reading. He brought these last down and put out the light. "The basket is a good-for-nothing old thing," he observed to Jolliffe as he descended; "the child may as well be allowed to keep it."

Mrs. Jolliffe almost held up her hands. "Is that the way to bring up a child?" was her mental answer. "Well, after this week

we shall wash at home, so it does not so much signify."

Felix was not half so fond of his little brother as a parent would have been, but he was, on the whole, nearly as indulgent. Dick, while he slowly retreated, heard permission given for him to keep the clothes-basket, but a ready instinct assured him that he would do well to retire from observation. He had other pieces of mischief on his mind beside the building of that child-nest in the tree, so he evaded his aunt when he heard her calling him, and creeping up to his little room, tumbled into bed and went to sleep as fast as possible.

He slept sweetly. So did not Mrs. Snaith, though she was much fatigued; a foreboding thought of impending questions haunted her. And as between ten and eleven o'clock the next morning she came forth from her tiny cottage to bring her little girls to the parsonage, her senses seemed to be sharpened

both by the new scene and the leisure given her for remarking it.

Miss de Berenger had asked her to bring the children. As well then, she thought, as at some future time. The little creatures, exquisitely neat and clean, with sunny locks flowing under their limp white hats, walked on before her, while she, very plainly clad, came after, all in sober brown. She entered the parsonage gate, and there stood the vicar in his white gown ; he had just been marrying a rustic couple at the church, and was leisurely divesting himself of this long white garment, which was so clean, that between the two great dark fir trees on the lawn, it seemed almost to shine.

Felix came up when he saw the children, met them just as they reached the front door, and gave a hand to each ; then addressed the nurse pleasantly. But, hardly noticing her answer, he seated himself on the outside of the dining-room window and

cast attentive glances at his two little guests, who, unabashed and calm, looked at him with wide-open eyes of the sweetest blue-grey, and found it interesting to notice how the clerk was folding up that long white gown, and how a tame jackdaw had come hopping up to Felix, and was perching itself on his knee. Sometimes the children answered when Felix spoke, sometimes the nurse, but an inward trembling shook her. She had thought the shy anxieties of those few moments would soon be over; but no—far otherwise. She looked earnestly at the clergyman, at this Mr. Felix de Berenger, and she saw in his face no recognition, but a growing conviction made her more aware that she did not see him for the first time. A dark, thin man of middle height, a pleasant face—though rather an anxious one—thin features. And the hair? Well, what of the hair? Felix took off his hat presently, for the morning was warm; then rising, he

turned the other side of his head towards her, as he called up at an open window, "Dick, Dick! Come down, you little monkey. Come; I want you." Yes, there it was, visible enough—one lock, narrow and perfectly white, among the otherwise umber waves of thick dark hair.

The nurse felt for the moment as if her heart stood still, and all was up with her. The curate! It was the curate who had been kind to her in her worst adversity, who had given her a shilling in the hop-garden.

He showed no signs of recognition. How, indeed, should he know her again, or she fail to know him again? He was not altered in the least, and had, as she instantly remembered, seen many and many a poor creature since such as she had been. But she—her lean, gaunt figure was changed by several years of peace, com-

fort, and good living. She was inclined, for her age, to be rather stout now. She was very neatly and becomingly dressed, for in place of that flimsy faded clothing, she wore plain dark colours, and her shining hair was disposed in two close bands down her face.

She looked well into his eyes, impelled by her very fear to seek the worst at once. He did not know her. And now a lovely little boy in a pinafore was coming up ; a dimpled creature as brown as a berry—hair, and eyes, and face—excepting where the clear crimson of the cheek showed through a little.

He was inclined to be very shamefaced. Amabel was not. She came up to him and gave him the usual greeting of infancy, a kiss. Then Delia slipped off Mr. de Berenger's knee, and after inspecting Dick for an instant, she also kissed him ; and then the children smiled at one another

all over their little faces, and, taking hands, walked off among the trees chattering.

Pretty little Dick! He was supremely happy that morning. The joy of their presence was as if two little child-angels had come to play with him. He made them welcome to all his best things; he also took them up the fruit-ladder to his nest. For more than four years after this, those beautiful nestlings spent their happiest hours in it.

But on this first climb into it they were aided by Andrew, who had originally helped Dick to tie the basket safely, and was now very impressive with all the children. “They were on no account to go up, nor down neither, without his help; they were to promise solemnly that they never would—to promise *as sure as death.*” So they did, knowing and caring about death nothing at all. But they knew they were happy—Dick especially—and he fell easily and at

once under the influence of their sex, and never so long as he lived escaped from it any more.

The leaves were very thick underneath them, so that they could not be seen from below. But they could see the great shining face of the church clock, the rooks leading off their second brood, the white road winding on through the heathery common, and, far beyond, a little hill in old Sir Sam's park, on the slope of which does and fawns were lying half hidden by the bracken.

In the mean time Mrs. Snaith, little aware what they were about, had been introduced by Jolliffe to the clean kitchen, and there, after a good deal of polite haggling, as, "Well, ma'am, I'm sure it's a shame," and "Well, ma'am, I couldn't bear myself sitting with my hands before me," had been accommodated with an apron, and allowed to make herself useful by stringing

and slicing beans. The party had been invited to an early dinner at the parsonage, and there were rabbits and parsley sauce to prepare, and there were late red currants to strip from the stalks for a fruit pudding. Aided by the circumstance that they had something to do, the ladies soon became friendly, and talked of such subjects as really interested them.

“ Well, it *is* a very small cottage, ma’am ; there you’re right.”

“ And in lodgings you’re saved a vast of trouble, so that if it wasn’t for the dripping——”

“ Ah, indeed ; you may well mention that, ma’am. Why, not one in ten of those landladies is to be depended on.”

Mrs. Snaith assented.

“ And to sit in your parlour,” she continued, “ and know as well as can be that they’re making their own crusts with your dripping, and that you mayn’t go down to

see it, is enough to spoil the best of tempers and the least particular."

They were rather a large party at dinner, for the new governess and her young sister had arrived; and Felix, as he sat at the head of the table, had only just marshalled them, said grace, and begun to wonder how the one young servant of the establishment would wait upon them all, when Mrs. Snaith appeared, carrying in the first dish, which she set before him and uncovered, as if she was performing some ordinary and looked-for duty.

"Mrs. Snaith!" he exclaimed.

"I should wish it, if you please, sir, whenever my young ladies is here," she replied calmly.

A very convenient wish, and she began to carry it out with a quiet and homely dignity that he much admired, every now and then giving the gentlest motherly admonition to the children, including little Dick. Felix

had a certain fear of a lady ; womanhood was sufficiently alarming to him without fine clothes, accomplishments, and a polished and self-possessed manner. He found himself most attracted by a good woman who was without these extraneous advantages ; this homely dignity and unruffled humility pleased him, and commanded his respect. He let Mrs. Snaith alone, and under her auspices the dinner went on pleasantly to its conclusion.

Little Amabel and her sister won great approval by their sweet looks and pretty behaviour at that dinner. They had been well taught, and could conduct themselves perfectly well at table.

Felix regarded them with attention ; they were graceful, they were fair, but he saw no special likeness to old Sir Sam's family.

The children had, in fact, been helped, by their mother's intense sympathy, to the

inheritance of a certain pensive wistfulness that was in their father's soul and countenance; the reflection of it was in their faces—only in their faces—and even there it appeared more as the expression of a sentiment than of a passion, that abiding passion of regret for his lameness that the bad, beautiful youth was always brooding over. When their lovely little faces were at rest, and no smiles rippled over them, their mother could often see that look, a witness to their father's sorrow and their mother's pity; it gave a strange, and to her a very touching, interest to both the children. There was an unusual contrast between the still deeps in their lucid, grave blue eyes, and the rosy lips, so dimpled and waggish, so ready to soften and smile, and show a mouthful of pearls.

“ Well, Felix; well, Amias,” said Miss de Berenger, when this dinner was over, and she was left alone with her two nephews,

“ I suppose you will both admit that I have brought a treasure into the family. Yes ! How well that woman waits ! What a sight the great heaps of potatoes must have been for her, and the cabbages and the buttered beans that Ann and Mary consumed ! I call to mind now your dear father asking me if I remembered a dinner we were at once, at their mother’s. ‘ Remember it ! ’ I exclaimed. ‘ Ay, thou poor ghost of a meal, while memory holds her place in an empty stomach.’ I was inspired to say it, just as Shakespeare was at first, though in general I am not at all poetical. And then the tipsy cake she gave us in the evening ! It was a tremendous falsehood to call it by such a name. Tipsy, indeed ! How was a whole cake to get tipsy on one glass of South African wine ? You need not look so wise, Amias ; a degrading thing, I suppose you’ll say, to make fun of even a dumb cake, when it’s drunk,” proceeded Miss de Beren-

ger, after a pause. "As if there could be real fun in the inebriation of anything whatever. Yes! Why, how very ridiculous you two are! I never saw such risible fellows in my life. And you a clergyman, too, Felix! What can you be laughing at now?"

While this conversation took place in the garden, and while the children played together, and the vegetarians, walking between thick hedges of peas and beans, and ridges of new potatoes, felt that they had come into a land of fatness and plenty, Mrs. Snaith, helping to wash the glass in the neat kitchen, was made welcome to a good deal of information that no amount of questioning would have procured for those in a different station of life to her informers.

These were Mr. Bolton, who had just stepped up to gather some early summer jennetings, but out of delicacy forbore to take them under the eyes of Felix, and so

waited till he should come in ; and Mrs. Jolliffe, who in dismissing the washerwoman, after counting out the clean clothes she had brought home, took occasion, with patronizing suavity, to recommend her to the new-comer as a very honest woman, and a good hand at getting up children's clothes.

Mrs. Snaith said she would employ her, and the grateful and respectful thanks that she and Jolliffe both received opened the heart of the latter still further, so that as the little woman retreated across the yard her praises followed her.

“ An honest little woman, and industrious too, Mrs. Snaith ; and has lately got the laundry work of the clerks at the brewery. Still, as she said to me, ‘ Mrs. Jolliffe,’ said she, ‘ there’s no sweet without its bitter, and most of those gentlemen air such extra large sizes, that I feel it hard I shouldhev to do justice to their shirts, at twopence

halfpenny apiece, when I should hev hed the same money if they'd been smaller.'"

"Her present husband is not to complain of for his size," observed Mr. Bolton.

"No, but that was a conveniency," quoth Mrs. Jolliffe; "and, for aught I know, the conveniency helped to decide her, as such things very frequently do, and no harm neither."

Mrs. Jolliffe spoke with such a meaning smile, that Mrs. Snaith testified some curiosity, whereupon she continued.

"For, as I said, a prudent little woman she was. Her first husband's Sunday coat was laid by as good as new; so she took and cut it smaller for her second to be married in, and very respectable he looked in it, and it saved money. And why not, Mr. Bolton?" she inquired, with a certain sharpness of reproof in her voice.

"Why not, indeed!" answered Mr. Bolton, hastening to agree, though at first

his face had assumed a slightly sarcastic expression. Then, on reflection, he veered round to his first thought. "But it don't seem a feeling thing to do, neither."

"*Feeling!*" quoth Mrs. Jolliffe, in the tone of one who makes a telling retort. "You and I can't talk together about feelings, and hope to agree, at all. Some folks have most feeling for that that can hold up its head and stop at home, which is my case. I don't pretend to understand them whose feeling is for that that must run away."

Here both Mrs. Jolliffe and Mr. Bolton laughed, and Mrs. Snaith was appealed to in words that confused and startled her, for they seemed to hint at her wretched husband's condition, as if the speaker knew all about it.

"When the law has got hold of a man, that man is not, therefore, to be cried down by me, and never shall be. No, nor by

you neither, ma'am, as your actions make evident."

Mrs. Snaith flushed and trembled, but said nothing, and with what relief, and what gratitude for it, she heard the rest of the conversation, neither of those who marked her rising colour could have the least idea.

"Now, my feelings go across the water. What's old Sam to me?"

"That you should talk of him so disrespectful, almost at his own gates!"

"Why not?" replied Mr. Bolton. "Do I owe him for a single drop of his beer, either given me or sold to me?"

"Right well you know that he'd have lost his seat if he'd given any away at the last election."

"Right well I do know it. For all that, old Sam, as I was saying, never gives a pleasant word to his neighbours. And never was a freer, friendlier man than

Mr. John, and free and friendly is he treated now by me and by others. Does he find any difficulty in getting intelligence of all he wants to know? I should say not. Why, Mrs. Snaith, Mr. John has more than one correspondent here, that knows as much about him as maybe I do, and maybe you do."

"Mr. John?" exclaimed Mrs. Snaith, now breathing freely. "Oh, Mr. John de Berenger it were that you spoke of?"

"Why, yes," said Mr. Bolton, looking at her with some admiration for what he considered an excellently feigned surprise. "Mr. John de Berenger, of course. Who else?"

CHAPTER IX.

OLD Sir Sam, as people called him, otherwise Sir Samuel Simcox de Berenger, was in some respects a particularly agreeable man. He had some undesirable qualities, but from the first he had been so strangely dealt with by circumstances, by nature, and by providence, so drawn on through the natural openings made by other men's mistakes, that if he had been any better, he would have been a hero; and that he certainly was not.

Most people thought he was a great deal richer than he ought to have been, and yet he had never taken a shilling but what the laws of his country accorded to him.

His own father, having two sons, had

taken him, the elder, into partnership, and given him a share in his great brewery business. The younger had gone into the army, obtaining the father's consent, though it was very reluctantly given.

This second son had married very young, and left three children, one of whom was the father of Felix, and another his aunt, Sarah de Berenger. To her the old grandfather had given a handsome fortune during his lifetime—had, in short, settled upon her a small estate which had come into the family by the female side, so that she was much better off than her two brothers ; for when, after his younger son's death, the old man also died, it was found that, owing to some fatal informality in the will, the representatives of the younger branch could not possess themselves of that interest in his business and his property which he had always expressed himself as intending to leave them.

Sir Samuel, without a lawsuit, was evidently master of all. He took immense pains to get the best legal opinions, and confidently expected that his two nephews would try the case. Being a pugnacious man, he looked forward to a fair fight, not without a certain amount of pleasure and excitement.

Perhaps the two nephews took counsel's opinion also; but however that might be, they never gave him a chance of fighting. Instead of going to law, they took themselves off, left him to swallow up all, and maintained themselves independently of him and his business.

There is little doubt that he would have been, to a great extent, the conqueror, if there had been a suit. In such a case, he would have held his head high, and also have done something for his late brother's family; but when he found that he was left master of the situation without a suit, and

also without a reconciliation, he felt it. To win in open fight is never so necessary to the comfort and pride of the winner, if he is right, as if he is wrong.

While Sir Samuel was considering that, though these nephews could make good no claim at law, yet they ought to have *something*, one of them chanced to die without a will, and he chose to consider himself the young man's heir-at-law. That is to say, he reflected that the dead nephew, having been the elder of the two, ought to have had, if he had lived, a double share; he would certainly have given him a double share. So he divided off that portion of his possessions as having been destined for his nephew, and he always called it, “What I came in for, in consequence of poor Tom's premature death.” Thus that claim settled itself.

The other nephew, the father of Felix, never quarrelled with him, but rather

seemed to set him at nought. Yet he felt that he must do his duty by him. To that end, he informed him that he should take his second son, then an infant, into the business ; which in due time he did, with what results has already been explained.

He never had any thanks from the father of the baby, who went to India before the future brewer could run alone ; but he occasionally called the child “ Small-beer,” by which he made it evident that Sir Samuel had leave to carry out his noble intention if he pleased. Sir Samuel felt that too ; for though he retained all the material advantage that had come of the unlucky will, he none the less fretted under a sense of the contempt that he knew his nephew held him in, and was always particularly cautious what he said, lest he should provoke an answer.

So he lived in the exercise of a certain

self-control, feeling it, in general, politic to be bland and obliging to his nephew ; and this, to a man of his choleric nature, was galling. At the same time, he took all opportunities of being affectionate and useful to his niece Sarah, who, being herself very well off, felt her brother's poverty the less keenly, and was often inclined to identify herself with the rich side of the family, as finding riches a great thing to have in common. Sarah lost both her brothers in their comparative youth. As for Felix, her nephew, his was a grievance once removed —an old story. His great-uncle, for a time, had been very kind to Amias—had, in fact, shown a decided affection for him ; it was as well now to let the old great-grandfather's will be forgotten.

Felix was helped in his wish to let it pass into the background, by his liking for old Sir Samuel's sons, the youngest of whom was only one year his own senior ; for Sir

Samuel had married somewhat late in life, so that his sons and his great-nephews were contemporaries.

And now two little girls had appeared upon the scene, to Sir Samuel's great surprise and very natural annoyance. His great-nephew had been the cause of their coming; and Miss de Berenger had told him pointedly that they were his grandchildren.

He was secretly enraged with Felix—would like to have had an encounter with him about it; the more so as he felt inclined to believe it was so.

No one knew so well as himself how utterly in the wrong his favourite son had always been in his quarrels with him. In fact, his affection for the scapegrace had enabled him to endure a vast deal that any father would have found hard, and, in hope of winning and then retaining him, to be almost subservient and long-indulgent.

But the favourite had got into debt many times after being brought home and freed. Finally, the father had been obliged to send him from home on an allowance, and John had actually gambled away great part of his interest even in that.

His father knew he had somehow deeply entangled himself, but knew not all. Sometimes he got a hint from Felix, to whom, at rare intervals, John still wrote, for as boys the two had been friends. When Sir Samuel found that Felix was arranging for the education of these little De Berengers, he felt how hard it was that his son should confide in a cousin rather than in himself, and he waited a week, in confident expectation that Felix would lay a case before him, declare that these were his grandchildren, and make some demand on him for money ; he intended to dispute every inch of the ground, not give a shilling, unless the fact was fully proved, and even then beat Felix

down to the lowest sum he could possibly be induced to accept. But the week came to an end, and Felix said not a word.

Everybody declared that these two little girls were the image of John. He felt a devouring anxiety to see them, for he was an affectionate old fellow. He had vowed to himself that they were none of his, and that, as John had acknowledged no marriage, it could be no duty of his to take upon him the great expense of their maintenance ; but here they were at his gates, and he longed to see them.

He asked Felix whether they had asked after him.

“ How should they, uncle,” exclaimed Felix, “ when they never heard of your existence ? ”

“ Why—why,” stuttered Sir Samuel, “ don’t they know anything at all about—the family ? ”

“ Evidently not. One of them can talk

plainly, and she seems, so far as I can judge, to know nothing about any of us."

"I would have done well by them, John," muttered the old man, as he drove home with an aching heart; "but you never had any bowels towards your old father. Why, look here; he flings his children at me, without so much as asking me for my blessing on them!"

The next day, about one o'clock, little Amabel and little Delia were seated on two high chairs at the table, in their tiny cottage, and waiting for their dinner, when an old gentleman looked in at the open door, smiled, nodded to them, and then came inside, taking off his hat and putting it on the window-sill among the flower-pots. A nice old gentleman, with white hair and white eyebrows. The little girls returned his nod and smiles; then the elder lifted up her small, high voice, and called through the open door that led to the little back kitchen,

“Mrs. Naif, Mrs. Naif!” A cheery voice answered, and then the younger child tried her skill as a summons. “Mrs. Naif, dear! Make haste, Mrs. Naif! Company’s come to dinner.”

Mrs. Snaith presently appeared with a good-sized rice pudding, and set it on the table, which was graced with a clean cloth.

Sir Samuel greeted her when she curtsied. “Good morning, ma’am. You are the nurse here, I presume?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Will you be seated, and allow me just to look on awhile.”

Mrs. Snaith sat down, and helped the little ones to their pudding. The elder was inclined to be slightly shy; the younger, pulling Mrs. Snaith by the sleeve, pointed at Sir Samuel with her spoon, and whispered some loving confidences in her ear.

“What does she say?” asked Sir Samuel.

The nurse smiled. “She says, sir, ‘Give the company some pudding.’”

“Does she, pretty lamb?” exclaimed the old baronet, with a sudden access of fervour; then recollecting himself, and noticing that the nurse was startled and coloured slightly, he said, by way of continuing his sentence, “I didn’t exactly catch your name, I think?”

“Mrs. Snaith, sir.”

“Yes, her name’s Mrs. Naith every day,” said the little Amabel, “but when she’s very good we call her Mamsey.”

“Her name’s Mamsey when she gives us strawberries and milk,” the other child explained. “But she hasn’t got a black face, company,” she continued, addressing him earnestly, as if it behoved him to testify to the truth of her words.

“A black face!” exclaimed the puzzled guest.

Mrs. Snaith explained. “There were some

American children with a black nurse, sir, at the seaside where we've been. They called her Mamsey, and so these little dears imitated them."

By this time it was evident that the nurse was ill at ease ; she perceived the deep interest with which her unbidden guest watched the children's words and ways. Her pride as a mother was not deceived with any thought that this was a tribute to their beauty or infantile sweetness ; she knew this must be the rich man, the great man of the place, who was held in that peculiar respect which merit and benevolence can never command. People say of Eastern nations, that those who would hold sway over them must needs make themselves feared, and they do not enough consider that this is almost as true at their own doors as it is at the ends of the earth. When the villagers had nodded and whispered in her presence, mysteriously hinting that anybody at a

glance could see who these children were, though she would not answer any questions, she had inwardly felt that the great and proud man whom they had in their thoughts would know better—that he would write to his son, who would at once reply that he knew nothing about these children, and there would be an end.

But here sat Sir Samuel, gazing at Amabel and Delia with a scrutiny sometimes keen, sometimes almost tender. He was making them prattle; he was at last actually drawing his Windsor chair to the table, and, at their desire, partaking of the new potatoes which concluded their meal.

He took so little notice of her that she had no need to speak; and that homely dignity which was natural to her coming to her aid, she rose and began to wait on the children and their guest, moving in and out between the little front room where they

were dining and the tiny kitchen behind ; marking all the old man's efforts to please the small coquettes, and how easily they were won, and how engaging they were ; and how noisy the canary was, bustling about in his cage, and singing every time they laughed, as if he longed for some attention too ; how the pale, overblown roses outside let their dropping leaves float in and drift over the table-cloth.

For the first time in her life, as she stood in the back kitchen, with hands pressed in one another, listening, she felt a jealous pang, not of her darlings themselves, but of the refined grace and delicate beauty which had so played into her hands as to make the part she had chosen for herself easy.

It was easy to play the part of their nurse —she had elected to play it—and yet her mother's heart resented its being always taken for granted that she could be nothing more.

“I fare almost afraid they’ll despise me when they get a bit older,” she thought. “If they do, dear lambs, I must take them away from these gentlefolks before it’s too late.”

Sir Samuel calling her, she came in and found Amabel on his knee. The brown face of little Dick was seen ; he was leaning in at the casement, and Delia, leaning out, was kissing him.

Beautiful little Dick was as happy about that time as anything that breathes can be. When they saw him Sir Samuel lost the attention of the other children.

They must have their sun-bonnets on. Mamsey must reach them down.

“Did they love him ? Would they like to see him again ? ”

Oh yes, they liked him, they liked him very much, but they wanted to go now with Dick ; and presently they all three set forth together down the quiet road to the vicar-

age, leaving Sir Samuel and Mrs. Snaith alone.

He was sitting in the Windsor chair, lost in thought, and looking after the children as well as the clustering rose-branches would let him.

She stood a moment expecting him to speak, but he did not; and, unable to bear inaction, she fetched in a tray, and when he looked round, she was quietly clearing the table, placing the remains of the simple dinner upon it.

He got up and she paused.

“ You have behaved with great discretion,” he said with energy; “ and the reticence which I hear you have displayed—the refusing, I mean, to answer people’s idle questions—has my entire approval,—I may say, commands my respect.”

Mrs. Snaith was silent.

“ I am quite aware,” he continued, “ of all that passed between you and Miss de

Berenger. I do not see that even she had a right to expect a full account of matters from you; but—but”—here he paused, baffled by the nurse’s grave silence—“ but the excellent care with which you fulfil your trust deserves my thanks, and, as I said before, your refusal to answer idle questions commands my respect.”

“ Thank you, sir. It is my wish to keep quiet, and I don’t fare to think I have any call to answer questions.”

“ But if I asked you some,” he answered, a little startled, “ of course it would be different.”

“ I beg your pardon. Not at all different, sir.”

“ I am Sir Samuel de Berenger, Mr. John de Berenger’s father. Now what do you say ? ”

“ Nothing, Sir Samuel.”

“ Nothing ! You’re ordered to keep silence, even to me ? ”

“ Sir, I never said I were under orders. I am not.”

“ Nonsense.”

“ And I ask your pardon, sir ; but if you know all I said to Miss de Berenger, you know all I ever shall say.”

“ Why, you foolish woman, you are enough to provoke a saint ! You quite mistake your employer’s meaning. What are you afraid of ? What do you mean ? Do you think you are to deny to *me* whose and what these children are ? It’s contrary to all reason—contrary to my son’s obvious meaning ; clean against their interest. Why, it’s—— I never met with such folly in my life ! ”

Here Sir Samuel launched into certain violent denunciations against folly in general, and this fool in particular ; but as she did not further enrage him by making any reply, but helplessly gazed at him while he stormed at her, on the other side of the

table, he soon managed to calm himself sufficiently to recur to the matter in hand.

“And whatever may be your motive, I tell you, there’s no more use than there is reason in your present line of conduct. It’s no use your denying to *me* that these are my grandchildren, I can see it in their faces. It’s no use your denying to *me* that they were thrown in my niece’s way on purpose that I might hear of them. No, don’t speak, woman—it’s my turn to speak now. I tell you all that stuff is of no use; I am not to be deceived.”

In the energy of his indignation he leaned over the table and shook his fist at her, and reddened to the roots of his snowy hair; while she, pale and doubtful, continued to find safety only in silence. Every moment for thought seemed to be something won; but she won many, and he had checked himself, and sat down again in his Windsor chair, and was fuming there in

more quiet fashion, while, still standing with her hand upon the tray, she was searching for some reply.

At last he said with a sigh, as if something in his own mind had checked him as much as her behaviour, "Perhaps the poor lambs were not born in wedlock."

"Oh yes, they were," she answered, sharply and decidedly; "that's a question I'd answer to anybody, let him be who he would."

"You can prove your words?"

"I could, if there was any need, Sir Samuel."

"Makes nothing of me—cares nothing what I think. But you never did, John. *If there was any need!*"

"You have a son, sir, *by what I can make out*," said the nurse, finishing her sentence with a certain emphasis.

"Oh yes—a son; his conduct looks like a son. You know well enough that I have a son. What of him?"

“If you’ll give me leave to advise you, sir——”

“Well?”

“Well, sir, though I don’t know the gentleman, I fare to think that if you wrote to him he would answer like a gentleman, and tell you——”

“Tell me what?”

“What would get the mistake out of your head, sir.”

“I don’t know where to find him.”

“Indeed, sir,” she answered slowly; “then worse luck for me! And yet,” she continued, as if in deep cogitation, “there are those not very far off that do know.”

Sir Samuel did not at all doubt her word, but he answered with the surprise he really felt at her making such an admission.

“You don’t say so!”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“If I write a letter to my son and bring

it to you, will you promise to direct it to him ? ” exclaimed the old baronet.

He regarded this admission as tantamount to a confession of all, and she, considering, on the contrary, that the letter would be so answered as to put an end to all, gave her consent.

“ I’m not that certain about it, sir, that I can promise, but I will do my best.”

He sat a few minutes longer, thinking and calming himself, then rose and put on his gloves, looking at her, meanwhile, almost with a smile in his eyes. “ You are a remarkably inconsistent woman,” he observed, but not at all rudely.

“ Sir ! ”

“ I said, Mrs. Snaith—— But, pooh ! what is the good of arguing ? Do you want any money ? ” he added sharply, and at the same time pulling out his purse.

“ No, sir,” she answered, colouring and drawing back.

“ Well, if you should, you’ll know whom to come to ; and I’ll send you down the letter to-morrow. Good morning.”

“ Good morning, Sir Samuel,” said Mrs. Snaith. And even to those simple words she seemed to impart an air of thoughtfulness and caution.

He went away without the shadow of a doubt in his mind that these little girls were his grandchildren ; and he did not consider, what was not the less perfectly certain, that if their nurse had made a claim on him, and come to the village demanding that he should acknowledge and assist them, he would have required ample proof of their rights in him, and perhaps not have been at all cordial to them at first, though this had been forthcoming.

As to the likeness. His son was a small, fair man. Absence and love had done a good work for his face in his father’s recollection. These small, fair creatures were

like what he had been in complexion as a child, but their dimpled features and dark eyelashes were far different. Yet Sir Samuel, reflecting on their sweet little faces, absolutely felt, not only that they recalled his son's childhood, but that he had almost forgotten, till he saw them, what a pretty and engaging little fellow his son had been as a child.

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning Sir Samuel's carriage stopped again at the door of the tiny cottage. A footman got down, went in, and soon came back to his master, with "The nurse's respects, Sir Samuel, and I was to say, if you wished to see the young ladies, they are up at the vicarage doing their lessons."

"I should like to see *her*."

"She hopes you'll excuse her, Sir Samuel; she is making bread, and has her hands in the dough."

Sir Samuel alighted, with the smallest of brown paper parcels in his hand, and sought Mrs. Snaith in her little clean back kitchen.

“ I thought, Mrs. Snaith, I need not trouble you to go all the way—a mile or more—to the post with this. I can post it for you.”

“ Oh, sir, it will be no trouble, thank you kindly; I have to walk over to the shop.”

“ If you’ll give me pen and ink, I’ll direct it, then.” He looked about, but saw nothing excepting the copper before which Mrs. Snaith was standing, with both hands plunged into the bread-pan.

Mrs. Snaith, blushing, said she had no pen and ink, but, if he would leave the letter, it would go all right. “ It’s not often I have to write anything,” she continued, as if excusing herself; “ and my little ladies do their copies at Mr. de Berenger’s.”

He half smiled, perceiving that his device for obtaining the direction had for the present failed.

“ I’ll see that it go all right, sir,” she repeated.

He was too proud to sue for what he wanted.

“So be it, then,” he answered, and took a letter from the brown paper covering and laid it on the clean edge of the copper. “I shall be much obliged to you,” he said, as he retired. “You’ll let me pay for the stamp, of course ?”

“How simple she is !” he thought. “She might just as well have told me my poor boy’s address, considering how easy it will be for me to find it out at the post-office.”

But it did not prove so easy. In less than a quarter of an hour Mr. Bolton passed, with a light cart full of vegetables that he had brought from the parsonage, and Mrs. Snaith, coming out to him, asked him if he would oblige a neighbour by getting that letter sent to Mr. John de Berenger.

Mr. Bolton turned the letter over and over several times, and looked critically at the paper and curiously at Mrs. Snaith.

“I’ll never breathe a word to any soul, if you will, Mr. Bolton, how it was, or who it was that got it done for me,” she pleaded.

Still Mr. Bolton paused and seemed to cogitate.

So she urged him further. “I’ve been that annoyed lately about him, that I can’t bear myself till I get things explained.”

“Well, you’ll observe,” answered Mr. Bolton, answering what he supposed to be her thought, but in fact only his own false supposition—“you’ll observe that there’s no post-office in nature equal to ours for sureness; and likewise, if you want a letter to be forwarded, you must write *that* in their foreign words; also you should never put ‘esquire’ on a letter that’s to go abroad—they’re apt to mistake the word for a man’s name. And you’ve always got to prepay a foreign letter.”

Mrs. Snaith produced a shilling, and to her surprise received only sixpence change;

but she was too polite to make any remark, and, having given Mr. Bolton the letter, hastened to escape from a subject almost sure to lead to questioning.

“And how is your good lady, Mr. Bolton? I saw her on Saturday in the shop, looking as fresh as a rose.”

“Fresh she is!” answered Mr. Bolton with enthusiasm. He had lately married a wife many years younger than himself. “Fresh she is, and always pleased. What her father said has come true. ‘Cornelius,’ says the old gentleman (he’s in the shoe line), ‘Cornelius, you’ll find her a rare one to make you laugh; her cheerful temper is as good as a daily blow out.’ ”

Mrs. Snaith, considering this a vulgar compliment, instinctively drew herself up; but the proud husband was spared any observation of her silent disapproval, for at that instant the horse, perhaps thinking he had waited long enough in the sun, suddenly

started down the road at a good pace, and Mr. Bolton, after calling to him in vain to stop, had to run after him. Mrs. Snaith only remained outside till he was seated and had the reins in his hand, then went in, glad to have got the letter forwarded, but with a lowered opinion of Mr. Bolton, as rather countrified and common, considering what a good shop he had, and that he kept the post-office.

Sir Samuel, who was not at all in the habit of shopping, went into Mr. Bolton's shop the next day, feigning to want some melon-seed, of which he ordered a ridiculously large quantity, and then asked Mrs. Bolton what foreign letters had been posted that day, or the day before.

It appeared that no foreign letters whatever had been posted for more than a fortnight.

Sir Samuel brought himself to say, “I have lost my son's (Mr. John de Berenger's)

address ; if one directed to him should be posted, will you kindly copy the address for me ? ”

“ I will, Sir Samuel,” said young Mrs. Bolton ; and when her husband came in, she related to him what had passed.

“ Lost the address, have the old gentleman ? ” quoth Mr. Bolton, calmly. “ Well, now, his gardener won’t put those melon-seeds in, I know, but they must be sent. Only think of old Sam’s losing the address ! ”

“ It’s a pity but what he was more careful,” observed Mrs. Bolton ; and so few letters passed through her hand, that it gave her no trouble to keep this request in mind.

Four days passed. “ John’s not in England,” thought Sir Samuel, “ or I should have had an answer before now.” Two more days passed. “ John’s not in France,” thought he. A fortnight.

“John’s not in Italy, nor in Germany either.” Six weeks. “John’s not in the States—at least, anywhere near the seaboard—nor in Canada.”

Three more months, and a letter from Ceylon, in John’s handwriting, was lying on his table. It was dated from a small place up the country, among the coffee plantations—was a very satisfactory letter on the whole; but the father soon saw, both by the date and the contents, that his son had not yet received the important letter. With a certain moderation of compunction which, however, satisfied Sir Samuel, he expressed his regret that his family, and his father in particular, had no better reason to be proud of him. He hoped to do better; had got employment that maintained him, and should write from time to time. This was a very hot place—steaming hot; in fact, he had to have a black boy standing beside him while he

shaved, to wipe the dew that every few minutes gathered and clouded the looking-glass. The boots he took off at night were covered in the morning with mould. But there was plenty of alligator shooting; he and some other fellows had shot two the week before. This was on the third page. His father went on to the end, which, with a description of how the other fellows who were newly come out “funked” when they saw a serpent, ended rather abruptly, “Your affectionate son,
JOHN DE BERENGER.”

Sir Samuel’s heart was appeased; both his pride and his affection soothed themselves over this letter. “The boy has not forgotten me; and he means to do better. Well, well, he has sown his wild oats. He will make me proud of him after all. Been in Ceylon six weeks, after stopping at Heidelberg all the winter. Ah !”

In the mean time Ann Thimbleby fulfilled her task of education as well as she knew how ; she was lucky enough to take sufficient interest in it to induce her to make experiments, and when one failed she tried another. At that time her inquisitive mind was much exercised on the subject of etymology, but the pains she took to instil some liking for it into the minds of her two elder pupils bore no fruit, excepting to make them like playing with words, while the little ones became familiar with a few uncommon expressions, which they used glibly in their childish talk.

“ He’s a greedy, *nefarious* boy,” said Amabel to Sir Samuel, speaking of Dick ; “ and we’re not friends with him.”

Sir Samuel had come to see the children ; he was seated in a chair on the parsonage lawn when she said this, and a slight stirring, five feet from the ground, in the great fir tree, made him cast up an inquiring

glance, and observe Dick looking out, shamefaced and red.

“What has he been about?” asked the old man, more to make the fair little creature talk than with any interest in Dick’s delinquency.

“Coz gave each of us a sugared almond,” said Amabel, pouting. “I said, ‘Dick, you may take a bite of mine,’ and he—— Oh, Dick, you *in-principled* boy, you gobbled it all up—and now,” she continued, with deep melancholy, “I can never get it back.”

Dick felt at that moment as much shame as mortals can feel for any delinquency whatever, shame being born with us full grown, and beginning, as a rule, to wax feeble before we have the truest cause to feel it. He wondered how it could have come to pass that he had done an action so utterly to be despised — wondered whether it would be forgotten by the time he was grown up—and felt, though

he was not equal to the expression of such a thing, that his future prospects were blasted, and his young life nipped as by a spring blight. How could he ever show his face again !

He moved uneasily on his branch, hiding himself among the thick greenery, and with dreary compunction listened to the conversation below, which was very friendly and confiding. But could he believe his ears ? In spite of what had unfortunately occurred, the old uncle in a very few minutes was actually calling to him.

“ Come down, you little scaramouch ; come here, I say. Do you see what this is ? ”

A whole shilling ! Not a new one, it is true, but good for buying things with. Evidently for him ! There was a reprieve. He descended, blushing with beautiful confusion, took it, darted out of the gate with it to a cottage below Mrs. Snaith’s, and returned,

almost able to hold up his head, with a goodly quantity of “bull’s-eyes” screwed up in paper.

These articles of commerce have almost disappeared from any but village shops. They are round lumps of sugar, flavoured with peppermint, and marked across with blue and red bands.

Dick squatted down beside Amabel, and opened the screw of paper. Sir Samuel was just thinking that she was a far lovelier child than *her father* had ever been.

“No,” said the little creature, declining this peace-offering, “I don’t like them, Dick; when I open my mouf they make my tongue feel so cold.”

She turned away her face—but *how useful it is to have money!*

“You’re cross,” said Dick. “I’m very sorry. Do kiss me this once and make it up.”

“I don’t want to kiss you,” said Amabel.

“Do,” pleaded Dick. “Well, if you will, *I'll give you the other sixpence!*”

There was the sixpence in his hand. Amabel looked at it—paused, relented. “If you'll go with me to the shop to spend it,” she said, “I will.”

Thereupon the two children kissed each other, and being now good friends again, left the bull's-eyes on the grass and ran off together through the vicarage gate; while the giver of the shilling was left to amuse himself with little dimpled Delia, who, seated on his knee, answered his questions about the seaside, and her lessons, and Mamsey, as well as she knew how.

A certain tenderness towards the children softened his heart, and made him feel younger again. The love of money gave way before it to a sufficient degree for the decision which he had formed, that they should never want for anything. Little Delia's lisping tongue reminded him of the

infantile talk of his own sons in their childhood. He had taken no interest in, and made few observations on, other children ; therefore, when the behaviour of Amabel and Delia stirred in him slumbering recollections of his own nursery, he regarded this as a proof of likeness to his family, and did not know that such were the common ways and wiles, and this was the ordinary English of childhood in general.

“ But the motive,” thought Sir Samuel, when, having mounted his horse, he went slowly along the shady road that led from the vicarage past the nurse’s, and past two or three other cottages, towards his own gate—“ the motive. No human being acts without a motive, and I cannot see the motive, however mistaken, that induces this woman to deny that these are John’s children. Why, they’re as like him as they can stare ; and I could declare, when I see their little ways and hear them lisp,

that it's my own boys over again." He paused, then went on slowly: "He might, to be sure, have threatened her that, if she told, he would stop the supplies—for, of course, he was always in imminent danger of being arrested whenever he came to see them; but he sailed about the time that she brought them here, no doubt by his orders. Well, I must wait. It is still *just possible* they may not be his, after all (pooh! it's not possible, though). However, he will not be long in letting me know. And considering that I've offered to take the whole charge of them, and provide for them too, if they are—— Here comes Felix, looking as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.—Well, nephew parson, how are you?"

Felix observed a certain familiar way in the greeting, a cordiality that he was not accustomed to. Not to be outdone, he shook hands with his uncle when the old

man stopped his horse, and asked where he could have been riding during the hottest hours of such a hot day.

Sir Samuel told him ; went a little from the subject to remark, in a casual way, that one of the little girls looked pale, and then said abruptly, “ I suppose I shall have to send her to the sea.”

Now, Felix knew that John de Berenger had written to his father. “ Has John acknowledged them, then ? ” he exclaimed with vehemence.

Sir Samuel admitted that he had not ; “ though, putting this thing and that thing together, nephew parson,” he continued, “ I no more doubt the fact than you do.”

Felix paused ; his conduct certainly appeared to show that he did not doubt it. His aunt Sarah had taught the children to call him Coz, and he had not forbidden it. While he was considering what answer to make, Sir Samuel repeated his former argument with himself.

“But, then, no human being acts without a motive, Felix.”

“Certainly not.”

“What motive can that woman have, nephew parson, in declaring that these children are none of mine ? ”

“I do not see that a *motive* is very far to seek,” observed Felix, “if that is what you want.”

“Nephew parson, that precise thing is what I do want.”

“She is all-powerful while she receives whatever John allows the children, and spends it as she pleases.”

“True—true.”

“She has an excellent situation, and an almost independent one. I have a good opinion of her. I think it probable she does not know the children are anything to you. John may have chosen her through an agent; through an agent he may correspond with her. If you take them up, you make

her place a sinecure, perhaps in the end dismiss her. How natural she should be hard to persuade that you have any right to them."

"But she knows that John is my son—and—and the fact is, she undertook, before I had his address, to get a letter sent to him."

"She did!" exclaimed Felix.

Sir Samuel nodded. Mrs. Snaith, in the opinion of Felix, forthwith went down; he was rather sorry.

"Now, as you are good at motives," continued the old man, "find me a motive for John's behaviour, nephew parson; there is that to think of also."

"Very true," said Felix, and he went on slowly: "John's motive, I should say, is transparent enough. It is evident that he has no claim, unless these are the children of a marriage."

Sir Samuel seemed to wince a little here.

“The only marriage I ever heard of that John wanted to make was one that you most violently opposed.”

“I always shall oppose it,” cried Sir Samuel, very red in the face. “I always will oppose it, to the last breath I can draw. Why—why, the fools had nothing to live upon—nothing at all.”

“No,” said Felix, rather coldly; “and yet it may have taken place, and these may be the offspring of it.”

“A Dissenting minister’s daughter!”

“Yes. Well, all that supposed, one may suppose also that John thinks these children have a better chance of pleasing you, if he does not force them on your notice, than if he does; but it is quite a work of supererogation to make out motives either for him or the nurse. The wisest course, I should say, is to regard everything as absolutely uncertain till next mail day, when all will be set at rest.”

“ Extraordinary ! ” he thought, when the two had parted, and were going different ways. “ So proud as old Sam is, that he should have demeaned himself to communicate with his own son, through the favour of a servant ! ”

“ *The fools had nothing to live on.* Of course not. He brought up John to no profession, and made him no regular and proper allowance ; now he smarts for it, and perhaps for preventing that marriage as well. He might have maintained John married for half what he has cost him single. As far as I know, John never went wrong till the quarrel about that poor girl.

“ I have never believed there was any instinctive drawing in the heart of a parent towards a stranger child. Is it possible that I see it here ? He will have it so. He is determined to believe that these little creatures are his grandchildren.

“ They are no trouble about the place, but

I feel, and I suppose I shall feel, that their probably being something to him makes me no better inclined to regard them as something to me."

Felix spoke with a touch of bitterness. Sir Samuel had never so much as asked after Amias, the young nephew whose boyish escapade had deprived him of an excellent opening and future provision. Felix, being absolutely honest with himself, admitted mentally that, if the boy had settled to the brewery business, it would not have hurt his own conscience: people must have beer, just as they must have money; the abuse of either, or both, is their own affair. But now that the youth had broken away from his uncle, had given such reasons for the rash act, and was taking the consequences, on the whole, well and humbly, Felix would have denied himself every comfort in life rather than have interfered with his conscience.

“So you met Uncle Sam?” observed Amias that evening. “I am glad I did not.”

“Why?”

“Because you say he was cordial, and that aggravates me. I don’t like to think he is happy and jolly, *helping everybody to get drunk*; and I am not happy because——”

“Well?” said Felix, with a smile.

Amias paused.

“You, at least, may wish him well,” said Felix; “he has never shown anything but kindness to you.”

“But I hope it will stick in his conscience,” observed Amias, “how all the judges talk against publicans and public-houses. Why, I was reading only this morning, that in some of the great towns two-thirds of the public-houses are brewers’ property, and that they buy up the rubbishing old tenements and let them out at a low rent, on condition that all the stuff sold in

them shall be of their own brewing. I hate the publicans."

"That's a fine Christian sentiment. Do you think there's no such thing as intemperance excepting in the case of strong drink; or can you really think that nobody is to blame for the drunkenness that degrades the country, excepting the distillers, the brewers, and the publicans?"

"Why, what do *you* think, Felix?"

"I think they are no worse than other people, excepting when they make direct efforts to keep up the present state of things, after having had the misery of it pointed out to them. We are all to blame, we and our fathers."

"No worse?—the publicans no worse?"

"Unless they adulterate."

"But they do. We know they put aqua-fortis in. And do you call oil of juniper, and coccus indicus, and photophosphate of iron proper things to drink? Did you never

hear of these drugs? And are you not aware that at many public-houses you can hardly get such a thing as unadulterated beer, and that they put salt in it on purpose to make people thirsty?"

"Your voice is a little cracked at present, which makes me think you may be rather young just yet to lecture with good effect, on this or any other subject."

"You are always so abominably calm, Felix. Well, anyhow, what I don't know yet about temperance, I shall find in my copy of 'The Publican's Mixing and Reducing Book.' I shall learn it all by heart, with its vile receipts for purifying tainted gin, etc. But you have no zeal; you are always making game of a fellow."

"On the contrary, your enthusiastic desire to do some good, and your ardent indignation against evil practices, are the qualities I like most in you. What I find ridiculous is that you are so positive."

“ I certainly do wish that most of the breweries and distilleries had accidentally got blown up ; and I wish most of the public-houses were forcibly shut up—prohibited.”

“ But not all ? ”

“ No, there must be some.”

“ How the ‘ some ’ would thrive ! Many people, however, see great danger in legal restraints. That a thing should be dangerous and wrong, gives it often attraction enough ; that it should also be forbidden, so far as is possible, might give it an extra charm.”

“ But that is not your view ? ”

“ Perhaps not. Others reason thus. The French are a very sober people ; every man of them may make his own wine, any man may sell it anywhere. What we should try for, rather than restriction, is freedom.”

“ I never thought of that.”

“ But you should think ; and you should learn all that can be known on all points beforehand. And you must give up wholesale

charges and exaggerations. There is also a certain thing that you would do well to settle forthwith, which is, whether it would give you most delight to reclaim two or three drunkards, or to make old Sam ridiculous in his own neighbourhood, and to know that everybody blamed him, and talked of the feud between you.”

“Two or three, Felix ! You might at least allow a fellow two or three dozen. Am I to give up riches and independence, and perhaps a seat in Parliament, for two or three ? ”

“You may be fairly said to have given these things up for nothing, for no principle whatever—merely for a ridiculous joke.”

“Well, it was rather hard upon you, old man ; I know that.”

“And it seems to me that you live upon the hope that you shall one day justify that joke.”

“So I do.”

“I consider that a low motive—anything but heroic, anything but philanthropic.”

“Well, I cannot be such a prig as to pretend that I think of nothing but philanthropy. ‘There’s a mixter, sir,’ as Bolton said; ‘you can’t expect to find no tares at all in the best bag of seed-corn.’ But perhaps you think the ‘mixter’ consists of a few grains of corn in a bag of tares?”

“I wish you to go away, not thinking of yourself as a martyr to principle, but simply as having made a joke and paid for it, and having now got to earn a living, if possible, in a manly, commonplace fashion. As for your zeal in the cause of temperance, I shall think something of it when you propose to begin to work for it in London, and nothing at all, so long as the joy of it depends on some great commotion made in our little town, just at our old uncle’s gates. As I said to you just now, we are all—that is, all this nation which calls itself Christian

—to blame for the present state of things. It is the selfishness of the whole community —the crowding up of the poor in foul air, where they crave stimulus, because they have not enough oxygen ; it is the sordid way in which we have let them live, without any sort of culture, without ennobling amusements, without enough of anything—enough variety of food, enough light, enough warmth, enough joy, enough kindly fellowship with those that are better off ;—it is our whole attitude toward them which has helped, not to make them a drunken people—for that they always were—but to keep them one. Our fathers drank deeply ; we have, during the last three generations, been slowly struggling upward toward sobriety. We had every help ; we only give them one help—the pledge. Do you think that if every drop of whisky, gin, and ale could be sunk into the sea, and the trade in liquor be stopped, it would make people sober ?

No. It might, with every other aid that could possibly be thought of, put an end to half the drunkenness; but it is a natural instinct in man to long for stimulus when he is overworked, or weary, or sick, or sad, or when he has been used to have it; and the other half would all turn brewers and distillers on their own account. You cannot undo the evil work of many generations with a few rough and ready schemes; you must be patient and painstaking, and you must not, above all, try to shove off the blame on other men's shoulders."

"All right, old man," said Amias, almost humbly.

He was to go away to London the next morning, at a very inconveniently early hour, by a third-class train; Felix having, after great efforts, at last got him into a Government office, at a salary on which it was hardly possible for him to be wholly maintained. He was to take

with him rather a large hamper of potatoes and other roots, with a few green vegetables also, so as to eke out his first attempt at providing for himself in his lodgings. Felix was to send him fruit and vegetables now and then. This was by their aunt Sarah's advice, and was worth while, as she explained to the brothers, because the lodgings Amias was to occupy were close to the railway station. "You can give your landlady a vegetable marrow or two," she observed; "but, whether or not, you will probably, for reasons of her own, find her always willing to send for your hamper. The children might have gathered you more currants if Ann had superintended properly, but, if you'll believe me, I found her among the cabbages, telling them that those tiresome white butterflies were considered by the Greeks to be emblems of your soul, and hunting out with dictionaries the derivations of a slug."

CHAPTER XI.

So Amias was gone. And Sir Samuel, when he quite by chance discovered this, felt somewhat aggrieved. It was manifest that he ought to have been told, and if the matter had been laid before him in a proper spirit, he should have given Amias something towards the needful expenses. He said so to his niece Sarah. “But I am not asked,” he continued, with bitterness, “not consulted at all. Oh dear, no; that family is much too proud to take any help from me.”

“Why doesn’t he give it without being asked? Why doesn’t he send Amias a

cheque now?" thought the good lady. "He always reminds me of an onion (for we all, as it is said, resemble in some degree one or other of the inferior animals). His conscience is wrapped round with as many layers to cover it from the light, as the heart of an onion. The outside layer is avarice. Yes; very thick. Peel that off, you come to a layer of self-conceit; peel again, you come to his scruples—a sort of mock conscience. He must not do anything so wrong as to help Felix unless Amias first humbles himself."

It never occurred to Miss de Berenger for a moment that she ought to help her nephew Felix herself. And as he had been used to her all his life, and been accustomed to accept her at her own valuation of herself, it never occurred to him either. One duty was strongly impressed on her mind; this was the duty of paying her bills. She generally incurred debts, to the full amount

of her income. Her course was plain ; she must pay them.

But she frequently came and stayed with Felix, kept his house for the time, and paid her exact proportion of the expenses, besides almost always suggesting some plan by which he saved something or gained some advantage.

She was always welcome. He found her inconsequent speeches and simple shrewdness in action decidedly attractive and refreshing. Family affection is so far from following in the wake of esteem, that merely to be sure of it and depend on it, is often to have it. Those who are loved, not for any special qualities in themselves, but just because they are human beings, and stand near to us, are almost sure to retain affection ; for they always will be human beings, and the longer they stand near to us the more at ease we shall feel with them. What so comfortable, what so

delightful, as perfect ease? Nothing in the world can surpass it but perfect love, and that we cannot all expect.

When Felix, the very first time he entered his empty rectory house, found his aunt there before him, inspecting the cupboards and having one cleaned out, he did not interfere with her, did not even ask her a question; in a man's indolent way, he thought she knew what she was about.

"Yes," she presently observed, "you've got dozens of empty pickle bottles and empty marmalade pots over at your lodgings. I shall have those beer bottles saved too, and put in here till we want them."

Felix was surprised, but he let her alone, and she locked the closet and took away the key.

A good while after this, she drove up in her pony-carriage, saying she had come to stay a week, and producing a great parcel of sugar, for which Felix was to pay.

“Bolton will not buy the common gooseberries and cherries at all; they are so cheap this year.” And she forthwith bustled into the garden and set everybody, excepting the vicar, to work to gather fruit. “I shall have a quantity of jam made of the gooseberries,” she observed to her nephew; “it will scarcely cost you threepence a pot. And the gooseberries could not be bottled, because the beer bottles have such narrow necks; they would stick in them. I shall bottle the red currants. There are sixty bottles; I counted them. I shall save out one dozen for mulberry syrup.” Thereupon she produced the big key of the cupboard, and before the week was over, there was a fine store of jam and excellent bottled fruit in the house.

Felix, of course, was glad; he knew enough about his own affairs to be sure that this would be a saving in his house-

keeping, and also make his table more various. But he did not thank his aunt; he was just as well aware that it was a great joy to her to intermeddle in his matters, as she was that she might avail herself of the privilege, and yet count on his belief that all her intermeddling was for the best.

But to return to Sir Samuel and his important letter. The mails had now gone by, and there was no answer. He wrote again, and in case the first should have miscarried, he entered on all the particulars once more in a second letter.

Then it occurred to him that Mrs. Snaith might, in all good faith, have sent the first letter to Heidelberg, not being aware of his son's change of address. He wrote, and after complying with certain forms, got it back from the *poste-restante*. He hardly knew whether to be most annoyed or relieved—so much time lost. But, then,

his son had not received a letter from him that he had neglected to answer.

It was now Christmas ; he knew that he must wait till March, and felt that he must not make himself ridiculous meanwhile by having the two little girls to his house, or by in any other way seeming to acknowledge them before the time.

But he accepted and returned nods and smiles, even at the church doors ; sometimes the parties exchanged kisses in less public places. The children liked to see his white head. Once Amabel climbed upon the seat of the pew at church, when the sermon was long, and looked over the high back, as if to ascertain whether he was in his place. Miss Thimbleby, who was in charge of her and the other two children, quietly took her down, but the entire congregation saw the pretty smile with which she had greeted the old man, and his involuntary answer to it.

Felix wrote constantly to his brother, and gave him all manner of good counsel, which Amias was assisted to follow by his very straitened circumstances. He said as little as he possibly could in answer concerning this want of money, but the discipline of life was very strict upon him that winter and spring. He was poorer than any of the young fellows with whom he was associated. During the first week of his sojourn his story came out, and he passed for a kind of hero among them; though almost all thought him a fool for his pains, and would have thought him a prig too, but for the open and boyish sincerity with which he made his love of temperance depend on his anger against his old uncle. Many and many a temperance lecture was rehearsed in the presence of those choice spirits, his companions, without the faintest thought of influencing their habits in regard to strong drink, but simply to delight them by reproducing the

ridiculous action and uncultivated language of certain zealots whom he now and then went to hear. He was a water-drinker, but escaped ridicule, because it was felt that this was not from high principle, but from indignation against his uncle for repudiating him. In the mean while it came in his way—for no better reason than has been given—to accumulate a vast amount of information concerning the misery and crime arising from drunkenness, the almost incredible sums paid by the poor for the drinks that are their ruin, and the constant temptations set before them on all sides. These facts, when he had time to think them over, sometimes impressed him a good deal.

Early in April a letter from Felix let him know that old Sam was in great affliction; the news had just reached him that his son John had died of fever in Ceylon, and he could not hold up his head at all.

“Poor old boy!” thought the inconse-

quent youth. “Well, after all, malt liquor (if only it could be got good and pure) is very wholesome ; it’s the public-houses that want doing away with.” So he schooled his mind for a little while into less intemperate thoughts upon temperance.

John de Berenger, in fact, never read his father’s important letter. The news of his death was communicated by a friend, a young man who was staying with him when his short illness came on, and who wrote of him very kindly, assuring his father that everything had been done for his comfort. Also, the letter was returned. The stranger apologized for having opened and read it, as a means of discovering to whom he should send the sad news. In consequence of the questions asked in it, he had collected every scrap of writing and every letter that he could find among John de Berenger’s effects, and now forwarded them. He had not read them, but thought it right to tell Sir Samuel

that, though the sick man had talked freely of his past life during the earlier stages of his illness, he had uttered no word that seemed to bear at all on such a matter as his father's letter unfolded.

Sir Samuel mourned for his son, and said to himself, "In a very short time I shall know all. The news of poor John's death will fall on that woman like a thunderbolt. Has she received it yet? Evidently not. I am left to tell it to whomsoever it may concern."

He searched the few letters that had been sent through and through; most of them contained pressing requests for payment of certain debts. There was not one that could possibly have come from Mrs. Snaith, or that seemed to concern the two little girls in any way whatever.

"But I have the whip-hand of her now," thought Sir Samuel. "She will see his death in the paper, even if the whole village

is not eager to tell it to her beforehand. As he has left absolutely nothing behind him, no more supplies can reach her. She will be glad enough soon to come to me and tell the whole truth. I shall not make the first move."

Mrs. Snaith knew what ample time had passed since the sending of her letter for an answer to reach Sir Samuel from any part of the world. He had not told her that he had received one—in fact, he had not spoken to her since she had taken the letter from his hand. She had often met him in the road, but had never accosted him. If he was quite satisfied now that he had made a ridiculous mistake, there was no need to make him own it, and thus, perhaps, bring on herself the dreaded question, "These children, not being my son's, why are they here? Whose are they?"

She always took refuge in silence, and tried to efface herself as much as possible

from the thoughts of others. Sometimes she thought she would steal away from her cottage, and again take the children among strangers ; but then careful reflection seemed to assure her that where she now was people had got used to her, and had ceased to wonder at her. There had seemed to be a mystery, but all the villagers considered that they had solved it, and all the same way ; there was no difference of opinion. What talk there still was, chiefly concerned what old Sam would do, and why the family, who doubtless knew all, were so silent about it. Besides, the children were well, happy, receiving a very good education, and were already too familiar with these De Berengers ever to forget them. Moreover, if she fled, it would not only rouse curiosity to the utmost, but Miss de Beringer would be almost certain to start in pursuit, and in all probability would eventually find her.

The foolish have us far more in their power than the wise. If it had not been for Sarah de Berenger, Mrs. Snaith felt that she could have confided the whole truth to Felix, got him to keep it absolutely secret, and also help her to get away; but nothing could possibly be confided to Sarah, or it would come out; and if it was not confided, she would search for the children, meanwhile raising such a commotion, that the matter was sure to get into the newspapers as a strange and romantic story. Sarah would, perhaps, be silly enough to publish descriptions of the children, with their Christian names; these alone would be sufficient to rouse the suspicions of any person whatever among her old friends. Finally, some hint of it would reach the Dills, and, through them, the dreaded convict husband.

Sarah was away from her home when the news of John's death reached her. She

came back and flew to Mrs. Snaith, asking where the darlings were.

“At the vicarage, ma’am, doing their lessons.”

“And their mourning—is that ordered? Sir Samuel will, of course, expect to see them in proper mourning.”

It was no use pretending to misunderstand, but Mrs. Snaith felt confident of her ground, and was determined to hold it. “No, ma’am,” she answered. “You have no call to trouble yourself any further about that mistake. I take leave to tell you that Sir Samuel expect nothing of the kind.”

That was on a Tuesday. Miss de Berenger considered that there would be plenty of time to get mourning ready by Sunday, and she wrote to Sir Samuel about it.

“The woman wants money already,” he thought; “let her come and ask for it.” And he wrote to his niece more curtly than kindly, desiring her not to interfere.

Mrs. Snaith did not apply for money, and at the end of the week Sir Samuel went to London, feeling that this was only a question of time.

In the mean while, knowing that whatever she did would make fresh talk, Mrs. Snaith dressed the children on Sunday in clean white frocks and white hats as usual, and sent them up to the vicarage, but had not courage to attend the morning service herself.

When the children came home to dinner, each had a black sash on. Cousin Sarah had sent them, they said, in answer to her questions, and Miss Thimbleby had put them on.

Mrs. Snaith shed a few quiet tears of vexation then. Sarah's folly had mastered her again.

To be in London a full year before he could hope for a holiday. This was the lot

of Amias, and what a long, slow, dark, and dirty year it seemed.

Occasionally, towards the end of it, he began to dream of the old church tower, and the rooks floating high above it in the clear elastic air, and to dream of scarlet strawberries ripening on their beds, and meadows full of buttercups, and hay being cut in the clear heat of noon, and of other common country sights and sounds which had never impressed him at all while he lived among them; also of Felix and of that little monkey Dick. Like those of many another boy, his affections had slumbered a good deal since his childhood. They were waking. He found that he was rather attached to his elder brother; and when Dick sent him letters of wholly intolerable badness, as regarded both the writing and the orthography, he read them over with a certain keenness of pleasure, recalled the beautiful little brown face,

imagined that he had always been very fond of Dick, and wondered whether the little fellow was grown.

April, May, and June went by. Sir Samuel, still in London, received no application from Mrs. Snaith ; “ but,” he argued, “ she may have been paid a quarter’s allowance for the children just before my poor son’s death.”

He wrote to Felix, requesting him not to lend her any money.

“ She may think,” he considered, “ that poor John has left money in the hands of his agent, and that through him she shall receive it. She cannot know as I do that he left nothing whatever behind him but his debts, and that I have his papers in my hands, which prove it fully. I wish I knew my dear boy’s motive, though.”

So he deluded himself. The human mind is always inexorable in demanding a motive for all human actions. It is only himself that each man permits to act without one,

and avails himself of the privilege with astonishing frequency ; sometimes letting a momentary caprice push itself in and snatch a reasonable motive out of his hand ; sometimes, from mere indolence or inattention, failing to make out what he means to do till the thing does itself, and he, still hesitating, looks on and lets it alone.

Sir Samuel kept hesitating, and failing to make out what he wanted in this particular instance. The children were receiving an excellent education, were taken very great care of by their nurse, and—he was not asked for a shilling. He did not distinctly put this and that together, but waited on occasion and let things drift. When he thought of future expense, he hardly knew what he believed concerning these little girls ; when he thought of his dear dead son, he did know. But his asking questions would not make them any more his grandchildren, if such they were, while it would,

as he thought, bring him their bills to pay. No, it would be dangerous to investigate. He should *now* not encourage that woman to talk. He elected to leave things alone, and he had to take the consequences.

Thus the days and weeks went by, till that happy time arrived when Amias was to go home for his destined holiday.

A slow third-class train was alone within his means, and the nearest station being seven miles from his brother's house, he was not to be met, but to send his box on by a carrier, and walk over himself.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of a very hot day when he stepped forth for his walk, first across a good many fields, then over the end of a great common, next through Sir Samuel de Berenger's wood, and finally along the winding country lane that went past his brother's gate.

He was still half a mile from it. The slow dusk had begun to gather; large

flowers of the bindweed, trailing over the low wayside hedge, were mere specks of milky whiteness; he could but just distinguish between them and the dogroses, could hardly detect the honeysuckle but for its fragrance.

“Delightful!” he thought, as he strode on. “The smell of things in this lane is worth all the sights in London put together. Whew! what’s that?”

He stopped. No cottage within a hundred yards, and yet a pungent, powerful whiff of something worse than London fog or smoke came past him, and lost itself among the honeysuckle. A smell of burning. He wondered—strode on—admitted to himself, almost with fear, that it was odd no one had come even thus far to meet him. Then, all on a sudden, behold, a great gap! Some slight thing fell with hardly a sound, and up mounted a shower of sparks. He ran on, shouting out in the dusk—

“Why—why, there’s something wrong ! What’s up ? What can be the matter ? Mrs. Snaith’s cottage is gone ! ”

Mrs. Snaith’s cottage was gone indeed—its place was vacant ; it was burnt to the ground. A few singed hollyhocks leaned forlornly forward to the road ; two elms, with all their leaves shrivelled up, held out bare and ghastly arms ; a puff of smoke came now and then from a dark heap of ashes, and a few sparks would mount when fanned by evening air.

Amias rushed on, dashed through a scattered group of people who seemed to be watching the rectory gates, and, encountering his aunt in the hall, demanded vehemently to be assured that Felix was all right.

“Yes, yes,” quoth Sarah ; “he’s in his room, changing his singed clothes. You needn’t bang at his door like a burglar,” she panted, for she had pursued him upstairs.

“I knew he would be in the scrimmage,” cried Amias, as Felix, opening his door a little way, let his brother in. “And where’s Dick?” shouted Amias through the keyhole, having satisfied himself at once that his brother was none the worse. He opened the door about an inch to receive her answer.

“He never was near the fire,” quoth Miss de Berenger. “As soon as I heard of it I ran into the garden, and there I found him, enjoying the prowl of innocence, his cat and his owl after him. He’s safe in bed now, very sulky to think what fun there has been and he not in it.”

“Anybody hurt?” asked Amias, as he was proceeding down a passage to look at Dick.

“Yes; Mrs. Snaith, a little, foolish woman. And old Nanny Fothergill was frightened almost into a fit, seeing the flames through her window.”

“Oh, she’s alive yet?”

“Yes,” quoth Miss de Berenger. “She’s not at all an irreligious woman, though she *has* lived to be ninety-four. I don’t know how she reconciles that with ‘the days of our life,’ you know, ‘are three-score years and ten.’ At the same time,” she continued, falling into thought, “I am quite clear that it would not be right of her to hasten matters.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE return of Amias had, indeed, followed closely on the conclusion of an exciting occurrence.

It was Thursday evening ; Felix always had full service then, and a sermon.

This was the favourite religious occasion of the week, and (except during the harvest) very well attended. A time-honoured institution ; the ringers ushered it in with a cheerful peal. Then, when days were long, the outlying hamlets, and not unfrequently the adjacent parishes, contributed their worshippers ; and even some people from the little town (former parishioners

of Felix) would walk over to join, and see how he fared. Then every old woman, as she came clattering up the brick aisle, felt some harmless pride in herself; she knew she must be welcome, helping to swell the congregation. She looked at Felix, as he stood gravely waiting in the desk, and he looked at her.

Then were given out long-winded hymns, dear to all the people. Then the rustic choir broke out into manifold quavers, and sang with a will. Then shrill, sweet voices of children answered, and farmers' wives put in like quavers (but more genteelly); while the farmers themselves, and the farmers' men, did their share with a gruff heartiness, not untuneful. Then, also, the "Methody folk," having no "Bethel" of their own, came to church, and expressed their assent to the more penitential prayers by an audible sigh and an occasional groan. They said of Felix that he was a gracious

young man, and knew how to hit hard; which two qualities they considered to be strictly harmonious.

But his own people gave him a good word as well. He had inherited this service from his predecessor, and finding it at a convenient hour and popular, kept it up with loyal and dutiful care. They said of him that “he had no pride; *he* didn’t mind shouting for a poor man. Preached just as loud and just as long, he did, in bad weather, when he had nobbut a few old creeturs and poor Simon Graves the cripple for congregation, as when the most chiefest draper and his lady walked over from the town to attend, as well as Mr. Pritchard the retired druggist, that kept his own gig, and was said to be worth some thousands of pounds.”

It is hardly needful to record that Felix did not find the singing ridiculous. It was far from perfect praise, but he supposed it

must be more acceptable than city music led by an organ, and sung by a paid choir.

There is something very pathetic in the worship of the poor and rustic. They often think they oblige the clergyman by coming to church. And the old have a touching humbleness about them; they feel a sincere sense of how worthless they are in this world, which they could hardly have attained unless the young had helped them to it. The rich mix the world with their prayers; so do the poor—thus: they feel that they come and say them with their betters.

So this was a Thursday evening. Felix felt the solemn sweetness of the hour. It was a clear, hot time of year, and all the doors and windows were open. He had an unusually large congregation, and had just mounted into the pulpit and given out his text, when, to the astonishment of the people, instead of beginning to preach, he stood bolt upright for an instant; then his

eyes, as it seemed involuntarily, fell on Mrs. Snaith (who sat just facing him), with a look of such significance, that she instantly started up and rushed out at the chancel door.

She thought of the little girls, naturally ; what had she in life but them ?

The amazed congregation gaped at him. He turned to the schoolmistress, and saying, "Keep all those children in their places," closed his Bible and exclaimed to the people generally, "My friends, remember that there are fire-buckets under the tower, and that the nearest water is in my pond. Mrs. Snaith's cottage is on fire."

The red light from it was already flaring high, and making pink the whitewashed walls and his gown. It had passed for a sunset flush, till from his height he saw what it meant ; and saw the two little girls running hand in hand down the dusty lane, with loose hair flying. They were

making their way, clad only in their white night-gowns, towards the church, for there they doubtless knew that Mamsey was.

Thanks to the way in which he had arranged his sentence, the mass of the people, as they rushed out of church, ran round to the tower, and when he himself descended, he met the two little girls, neither hurt nor frightened, running up to the door. Each had a great doll—her best doll—under one arm; but when they saw him, with childish modesty they sat down on a grassy grave, and tucked their little feet into their gowns. It was such a very hot night, that there was no risk of their taking harm from their evening excursion. Not that any one thought of that, or thought much about them, excepting Felix, who, fearing that Mrs. Snaith might not have seen them, and might risk her life for their sake, followed on after her at the top of his speed, leaving them behind with his aunt Sarah.

“ Yes ! ” exclaimed Sarah, when describing the scene afterwards to Amias. “ There are occasions when decorum and dignity are forgotten. If you had seen what Felix looked like, rushing down the lane with his surplice flying ! An exaggerated owl suggested itself, or a ghost pursued by its creditors. These are the things that give Dissenters such a hold when they cry out for Disestablishment. However, by the time he overtook the clerk, he had got it off ; he flung it over the old man’s arm, who folded it up, and laid it on the grass under a fir tree.”

Felix on this occasion found little scope for the exercise of courage, and no opportunity of giving aid. The dry thatch was sending out an even breadth of flame to the very middle of the road ; there was (as he supposed) no approaching. There was great shouting ; men as well as women were eagerly handing on fire-buckets, while he

searched the crowd for Mrs. Snaith, and was told, to his amazement, that she was inside the blazing premises. He had scarcely heard it when she emerged from them, with a box under her arm. He and Mr. Bolton advanced to help her forward. Her gown was smoking, and some buckets of water were thrown all over them without ceremony, as their bearers, running up with them from the pond, saw the state of the case. Mr. Bolton, dripping as he was, could not forbear to moralize. "Now, didn't I tell you, ma'am, 'twas too late? Your things were all alright. This is one of the occasions when folks may be glad their goods ain't worth much, 'stead of risking their precious lives to save them. Sit down, there's a good creature," he continued, as he and Felix conducted her to a grassy bank.

Mrs. Snaith put a small box into the hands of Felix, then sat down and wiped her face.

“Your gown’s no better than tinder,” continued Mr. Bolton, taking a mean advantage of her inability to answer. “Choked a’most, I can see. And you’ve got me a good suit of clothes spoilt very near, and the water, that’s black as ink, running over me and Mr. de Berenger, and right into our shoes, just because you must needs save your Sunday bonnet. There’s nothing better in that box, I’ll be bound. And I did tell you your Windsor chairs were safe outside, before even we got out of church, and your eight-day clock, and your best fender and fire-irons.” Here he gave himself a shake, and a pool of water enlarged itself at his feet.

“Let her alone,” said Felix, compassionately. “She thought the children were inside.”

“No, sir,” said Mrs. Snaith, recovering her voice, “I didn’t.”

Having thus dissipated his sympathy,

she got back her box from him, and he also felt for the first time how wet he was. He, too, felt inclined to moralize.

A good many buckets of water had by this time been flung at the fire, but it seemed to send all out in steam again, and before ever a straw of the thatch was wet, and just as the sunset flush faded, all that had once been a habitation had gone up or gone down. It was not. A thick black cloud of pungent smoke brooded still among the trees, and a soft wet heap of ashes was lying in the garden. The shouting and excitement were over. It had been a very old cottage, and built of wood and plaster; dry weather had made the thatch ready for a spark, which had come from the chimney. Well, it had been a strange thing to see how fast it had melted down, or with what a rage of haste the flame and smoke of it had ascended; but, after all, the people considered it had not been what

any one could call a tragical sight: nobody was injured, and there was hardly any property in it worth mentioning.

Felix was a little hoarse the next morning, after his wetting, when Mrs. Snaith knocked at his study door, and asked if she might speak with him.

She and her children had slept at the rectory; her eight-day clock had been accommodated in the kitchen, and was diligently ticking and striking against the clock of the house. Her Windsor chairs, also her fender and fire-irons, some bedding, and a few toys, were disposed about a large empty room. No need to apologize for their presence in it; they made it look more habitable.

These things had been saved by the first man who discovered the fire, and who had carried the two little girls downstairs before he gave the alarm.

Mrs. Snaith, over and above a sort of

contrition for the trouble her goods had caused in their burning—or saving, as the case might be—was much vexed at the drenching Mr. de Berenger had got, and the cold it had evidently given him.

Felix had fortunately been only arrayed at the time in a rusty old camlet cassock; it was still in course of being slowly dried at the kitchen fire. Jolliffe said it could take no damage; it was past that. This was a secret source of comfort to Mrs. Snaith. But she longed to explain matters, and she wanted to know what had been done with her box. As Felix opened the door to let her enter, she felt a certain hint of disapproval in his voice, hoarse though it was.

“If you please, sir,” she began, “might I see if the things in my box are safe?”

“Oh, your box,” he answered, looking about him. “What did I do with it? There it is—just inside the fender. You

risked a great deal for that box, Mrs. Snaith."

He was sitting now at his writing-table, and, pointing with his pen at the scorched and smoky article, was surprised to see the eagerness with which she darted upon it, as she replied, "Well, yes, sir; but what else could I do? If I'd lost that, I should never have forgave myself. I didn't ought to have kept it in the copper, but I thought it was a safe place, too."

She set it on the table before him.

"This is a sort of thing that people call a bandbox, is it not?" he inquired. "You surely kept nothing valuable in it?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I thought, in case of thieves, they would never think of looking in a bandbox for what I'd got. It's full of papers and things, sir. All I have for maintaining the children, and schooling them, and that."

Felix was struck with astonishment

when she opened it, and began to lay its contents before him.

“Why, this is property,” he exclaimed, taking up a paper. “This is a United States bond, payable to bearer. If this had been burnt, the money it brings in would have been lost, forfeited, and, as far as I know, irreclaimable.”

“Yes, I know, sir. I was fully warned.”

“By whom?”

Mrs. Snaith was not to be caught; she made an evident pause here, choosing her words.

“By him that gave them over to me, sir. He advised me to turn them into another kind of property so soon as I could. But I never could exactly make out how. And I was afraid it might be found out.”

She stopped and coloured, as if vexed with herself, when she had said these last words. He made as if he had not heard

them ; and she had such trust in him, and in his gentle manhood, that, observing this, she felt safe again, as if she had not made that little slip of the tongue.

“ Where is the list ? You have a list of the papers, of course,” continued Felix ; and he had scarcely any doubt that he should be shown his cousin John de Berenger’s handwriting.

“ I have no list, sir.”

Felix, full of surprise, paused again. He had set a chair for her opposite to himself, and as she took out paper after paper, and handed them to him across the narrow table, he received each and scanned it with curiosity and interest.

“ Would you like me to make a list for you ? ” he said at last.

“ I should be much obliged to you, sir. Most of them have numbers—I’ve noticed that ; and I have some of the numbers in my memory.”

“Do I understand that no list, even of the numbers, was given you?”

“No, sir,” she replied, as if apologizing for the donor. “It were rather a hasty thing, and a legal document cost money.”

“A legal document! Well, Mrs. Snaith”—here he paused; he would not mention a name, she having so carefully and pointedly refrained from doing so—“well, Mrs. Snaith, *he* showed great confidence in you that gave these papers over to your charge.”

“He hadn’t any choice, sir,” she put in, but rather faintly. (“I’ll be bound he hadn’t!” thought Felix.) And she continued her sentence, “And it was no more than my due to have them.”

“Still, as I said, it was a great mark of confidence,” continued Felix, “and far be it from me to show less. But I may say, and I do, that it was a strange act of imprudence in you to keep this property

by you in such a form, specially though (as you admit) you were expressly warned not to do so. Since you lived here you have, as I remember, taken a journey several times. Did you carry this box with you ? ”

“ Yes, sir ; I went to get what they call the dividends paid. I fared to think I ought not to trouble *you* about this, but now you have come to know——”

“ Well, Mrs. Snaith ? ”

“ Perhaps you wouldn’t mind the trouble of letting me understand how to turn them into something safer—invest them over again. You see, sir, if I were to die, it would be very awkward.”

“ Very, indeed,” said Felix, gravely ; “ because, for anything that appears to the contrary, this property is absolutely yours ; so that, if you died, not a shilling of it could be claimed for the children. I say,” he continued, seeing her look amazed, “ that the two children, being no relation to you, could

not, in case of your death, claim to possess what is only payable to Hannah Snaith. Your own relations might claim it, you see, and the children would actually be cut out."

Mrs. Snaith, on hearing this, turned extremely pale. She saw that she herself was, in case she died, so acting as to cut her children out of the money which she only cared to have for their sake. What had she not sacrificed already for them? How should she learn to do anything more?

"But surely there is a will?" continued Felix, the strangeness of John's supposed conduct growing on him. "No doubt, though you may not be aware of it, some other person, some other guardian, must have been appointed to meet such a case."

Mrs. Snaith, still very pale, was silent. If she had only said so much as "I do not know," he would have been better satisfied.

"I take for granted that the person,

whoever he was, that made over this property to you, did so in full confidence that it would be faithfully spent on and for these children."

To this appeal she still made no reply. She had for some time seen no cause to fear that her wretched husband would ever find her; she had left behind her, at present divided among her own relations, so much of the income as she felt it her duty to let him take, and she meant the children to inherit the remainder. "I may die any day," was the thought now pressing on her, "and so sure as I die, they would advertise for my relations, let them have it, and, unless they found out the truth, which would be still worse, my dears would be left penniless."

"Sir," she said at last, "if it please the Lord, I hope I shall live to see my—dear—young ladies grow up."

The slight, the undefinable air of dis-

approval, daunted her. She was so much puzzled, so much agitated by the perception of how nearly she had lost everything, and by his remark as to the children not being related to her, that she had no intelligence at liberty for noticing that disapproval was an odd sensation for a man to exhibit concerning a matter that was no affair of his. Still less did she think of Sir Samuel's former notion, as perhaps shared by Felix. She never doubted that the old man had received a letter from his son, which had set the matter at rest. She often thought he had gone away because he was proudly angry that he ever should have been so deceived, and should have demeaned himself to come and question her.

There was Sarah, to be sure—the children were still allowed to call her Coz—but Sarah was so inconsequent, so wrong-headed, that she and her doings hardly seemed to count.

“I have been very foolish, I own, sir,”

she said at last, in a tone of apology, for, as has just been explained, the reason of his disapproval was hidden from her. “What do you think it would be best for me to do now?”

“I am not a very good man of business,” Felix answered, “but I think this property could not be invested in the names of the two children—only by guardians or trustees, for their benefit.” Then he paused to think. “I am the more likely to be right in this notion, because it has not been done already; but I can easily ascertain. If you consent to its being invested for them,” he continued, “I will agree to be one of the guardians, you being the other.”

Amazing kindness! remarkable condescension! Mrs. Snaith could not hear it and keep her seat. She rose and curtsied. “Sir, you are very kind; I am deeply obliged to you,” she answered, very highly flattered, and also very much flustered. “I

never could have hoped for such goodness ; but it's just like you, sir."

Why was it "like" in Mrs. Snaith's opinion ? Because Felix stood godfather to half the children baptized in his parish ; because he let himself be called, at all untimely hours, to comfort the sick ; because he had housed her goods, and helped to carry them in as a matter of course ; because she had more than once seen him carry the market basket of a poor rheumatic old woman, and lend her the aid of his arm as well to help her home—these were some of the reasons why it was "like him" to propose being guardian to her little treasures.

Felix looked up when, again seating herself, she pushed the papers toward him, as if giving them over to his charge for good and all.

The shadow of a smile crossed his face. He did not see that it was so very kind ; but the tinge of disapproval vanished.

“ You consent, then ? ”

“ Yes, sir, I consent, and thank you kindly ; but I am that circumstanced, as I can only say I consent unless *he* should interfere that may be able to interfere.”

“ Now, what does she mean by that ? ” thought Felix, still strong in the notion that he was to be guardian to John de Berenger’s children. “ Can she mean old Sam ? I suppose she does.”

But though his face was full of cogitation, the sunshine of approval had come back to it—he was even feeling that he had wronged her ; and when she asked if he would lock the papers up in some safe place, and do as he pleased about investments, he felt suddenly that he did not want such perfect liberty as that. “ I shall do nothing without consulting a lawyer,” he said, “ and you will be so good as to take care of the list I have made.”

“ Hadn’t you better keep it, sir ? ” she

answered, in her simplicity ; “ it would save you the trouble of making another.”

“ No, Mrs. Snaith,” he answered, and laughed and held out his hand, as he generally did to his parishioners. So she shook hands with him and left the room, feeling as if she should like to serve him all her days.

When she had retired, Felix again looked over the papers. “ All made payable to bearer—that bearer, Hannah Snaith.” Now, if John de Berenger had made that money over to her during his lifetime, it must have been to protect it, so that it could not be recognized as his, and claimed by his creditors. He must have trusted her ; and she had proved worthy of his trust as regarded her honesty. As regarded her prudence—no !

Felix leaned his chin on one hand, and turning over those papers with the other, began to puzzle himself with a problem

which he stated wrongly, and which, consequently, could have no right answer.

The problem was this.

“As John de Berenger had died deeply in debt, could this money (invested in the name of Hannah Snaith) be considered in fairness to belong to *his* children; was it not the property of his creditors? Had he not proved, by the course he had taken, in order to conceal or protect it from them, that it was in justice theirs?

“That depends,” Felix presently thought, “on how John got the money. Wait a minute. This woman, Hannah Snaith, has repeatedly declared that she knew nothing about John. After all, why may not this be true? Why may not the money have come through his wife, whoever she was?

“No, that won’t do. ‘By *him* that made them over to me,’ she said. Well, why should it not have been the wife’s father?

“Let me think this out. If John did

marry, as I suppose is certain (at least, one of the few things Hannah Snaith has positively declared is that these children were born in wedlock, and that she could easily prove it if necessary)—as he did marry, I will therefore say he must be supposed to have married that poor, pretty young creature, the Baptist minister's daughter, whom he harped upon to me for years, fell in love with when she was only fifteen, as he saw her passing to and from school—Fanny Tindale (neither child is called Fanny, by-the-by). Well, let us say that after her father moved away to somewhere in Lincolnshire, I think it was, John went and married Fanny Tindale. I know she died some time ago. Suppose her father, a vulgar old fellow, but not particularly poor, that I am aware of, saved, or at any rate died possessed of, what I now see before me—I am sure I have heard that he too is dead—of course his care would be to prevent John

from ever touching his money ; but if he died before his daughter, he may have feared lest somehow it might be got hold of by the creditors, and may have chosen to trust it to a person whom he knew, and no relation, in the faith of her honesty. Her being more of his class in life than of John's, is much in favour of the theory. And this is in favour of it too, that by all I know of her—and I know her now pretty well—I seem to be assured that she is not a person who would lend herself to any scheme that she knew to be dishonest."

Felix de Berenger, having thus stated his problem, thought the better of himself for finding an answer to it so convincing and so complete.

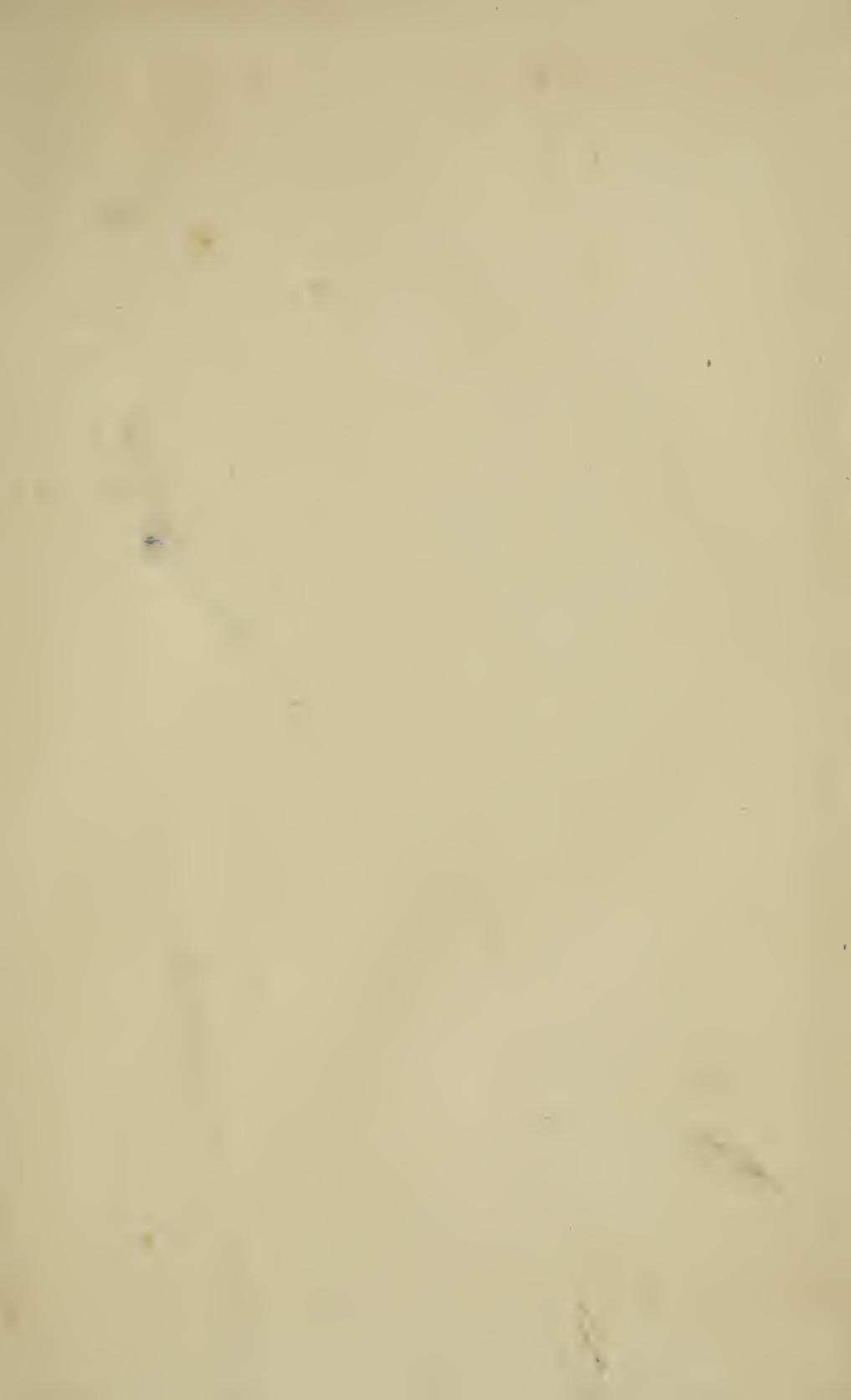
"I wonder I never thought of this before," he observed, as with a satisfied air he locked up Hannah Snaith's papers. "Poor little waifs ! Yes, I see it all."

An uncomfortable reflection sometimes

presses on us, to the effect that the world is full of people who think they have an answer to most of the problems of life, or at least to such as more especially concern their own lives. Who think so—but we are sure they are mistaken. And is it not possible—just possible—though to the last degree improbable, that we, we ourselves, may be? No, that flash of intelligence crossing the shady chambers of thought is soon put out; of such reflections the human mind is always impatient.

Yet a great many of us know no more of the answers to such problems as lie close about us, and most concern us, than did the Reverend Felix de Berenger in this recorded instance, and nevertheless we, perhaps, as he did, bring a great deal of good out of the mistaken circumstances.

END OF VOL. I.



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 084214102